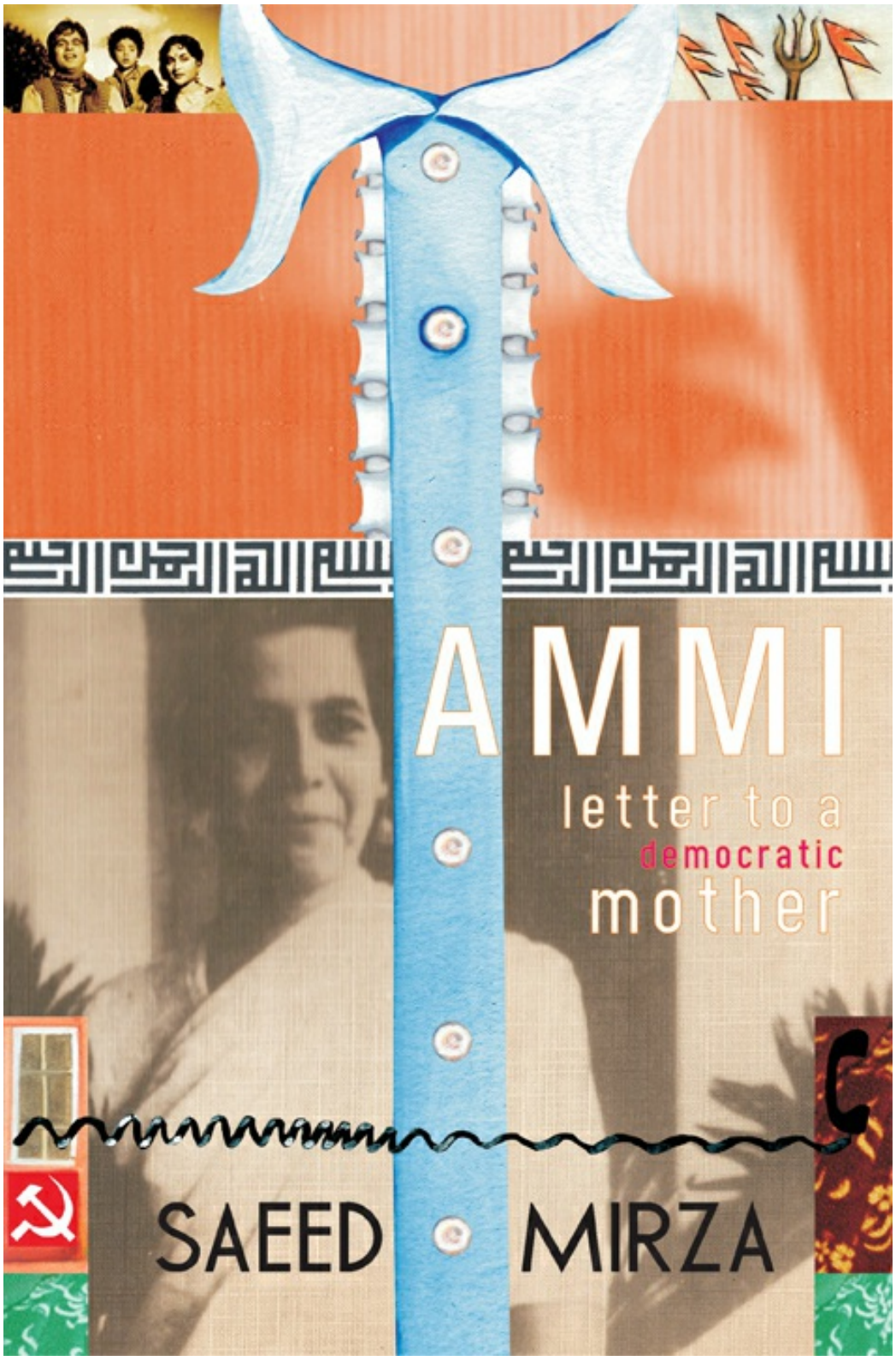


Title

Author


AMMI
letter to a
democratic
mother
SAEED MIRZA

AMMI

Ammi: Letter to a Democratic Mother is a novel that takes the form of a letter written by Saeed Mirza to his late mother, a pastiche of memories that nonour the political creed she stood for, the egalitarian spirit of democracy she believed in, the faith from which she drew strength.

Shifting deftly from one form to another—short story, poetry, parable, legend, satire, travelogue, memoir, history, diatribe, film script—Mirza creates an unforgettable literary installation. *Ammi* moves seamlessly from a moving, magical tale of love and romance to a personal testimony of growing up in India to a discourse between history and politics that presses into service Mulla Nasruddin, Studs Terkel, Ibn Senna, Eklavaya and Ra'abia Basri. What emerges is an unforgettable chronicle of love in a time of change and destruction, and a passionate political testament for the present. Combative and lyrical, moving and relentlessly inquiring, *Ammi* offers a way of seeing our history and our future that is impossible to ignore.

*

Saeed Akhtar Mirza is a pioneer of the New Wave, progressive cinema in India. His iconoclastic films, including *Arvind Desai ki Ajeeb Dastaan* (1978), *Albert Pinto ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai?* (1980), *Mohan Joshi Haazir Ho* (1984), *Salim Langde pe Mat Ro* (1989) and *Naseem* (1995) captured the passions and frustrations of an India emerging uneasily into the 21st century. His films have all won major awards including the National Awards for film excellence in India. He is the director of the popular TV serials *Nukkad* (1986) and *Intezaar* (1988), along with various documentary films on social welfare and cultural activism. Mirza trained at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune and has also taught there. He has lectured widely on Indian cinema at universities in

India and the US. He contributes regularly to Indian newspapers and magazines on current political debates and through film reviews. He lives in Mumbai and Goa. *Ammi: Letter to a Democratic Mother* is his first novel.

PRAISE FOR
AMMI: LETTER TO A DEMOCRATIC MOTHER

Mirza writes simply and, with a film maker's passion for authenticity, he makes everyday events tell a deeply complex story.—*Books Today*

[Mirza's] political commentary does not lapse into polemical rhetoric or the convoluted jargon of sociologists. It is instead cryptic and pointed . . . refreshing and candid.—*Deccan Herald*

Mirza's book is a wonderful compendium of memories with pertinent comments about a world that is often guilty of judging men and civilizations by what they have, not what they are.—*The Hindu*

AMMI

letter to a democratic mother

SAEED AKHTAR MIRZA



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For my father

FARHAT AKHTAR MIRZA

preface

This novel, if I can call it one, was written as a response to words that I believe have lost their meanings and yet seem to challenge each other: democratic versus undemocratic, civilized versus uncivilized, rogue states versus law-abiding ones. 'Meaningless words,' I thought to myself, 'that were challenging each other meaninglessly.' The questions that crossed my mind were many, what were the criteria used to arrive at these categories? Who were the members of the jury sitting on judgement? Was the jury an acceptable one? Besides, in these categories there was an insidious arrogance which denied ordinary people their wisdom and dignity that I found difficult to understand or stomach.

How could I respond? What form would my book take? How could I make an abstract idea that was inherently political into something that was tangible and hopefully lyrical? These were other questions that worried me greatly as I sat down to write. Finally I chose to introspect and weave in my own memories of growing up in India, of going to school and college, of working and travelling and somehow link it all up to a wider world and see myself both as an Indian and an internationalist. The form of the book that eventually emerged could, perhaps, be categorized as miniatures set in a mural: a kind of reflective, personal journey set in a background of ideas, politics and history. In all of this I also wanted to include the love story of two extraordinary people because I firmly believed that their story need to be told, besides both of them seemed to be promoting me from the wings and urging me on. Perhaps they also have a stake in what I have to say.

What have I written? I do not know. Will it make sense to my readers? I do not know. Is it a novel or an anti-novel? I do not

know. What I do know is that I struggled and groped and, very often floundered to contain all that was going through my mind, and in this struggle there were a few friends who came along and helped. There was Essar who patiently read through two versions of my manuscripts. He did not question the form I had chosen but gave me invaluable advice on how to improve upon it. There was Doreen, my Irish neighbour in Goa who carefully read the first draft and asked me a lot of questions. Trying to provide the answers helped me sort out my own confusion. There were Abhijit and Rajan and Kalpana and Aakar who did their bit too by not just reading what I had written but actually found the reasons to like it. That helped a lot. Another friend Naresh didn't even bother to respond. I'll have to draw my own conclusions from that. There was Ashok, my reclusive friend, who quietly shook my hand and smiled. 'I expected this kind of book from you,' he said. I think he liked it. There was Shad, my young editor, who patiently did his job even as I flooded him with updated versions of the manuscript almost every week. Young people these days are compassionate. There was my friend Indu who said my book was 'unputdownable' and I loved her for saying that though I didn't quite believe her. There were my two long distance sons who had read just a few parts of my book but kept telling me what a great job I was doing. That's why children are so wonderful. I hope they repeat what they have told me once they actually read my work completely. There was Romesh, my brother-in-law who welcomed me to his home in the hills and provided me with the poetry that has become such an integral part of my book. Finally there was my wife Jennifer. She said she liked the book in many parts but somehow felt that as a whole it seemed disjointed and lacked cohesion. I sat down and made quite a few changes and hoped that what I now had could be called linear with a beginning, middle and end. Jennifer read it again and remained dissatisfied. I made a few more changes and she now says she had come to like the whole though I secretly feel it has more to do with the exhaustion of reading my manuscript over and over again.

To all these people I say thank you.

Mumbai, May 2007

SAEED AKHTAR MIRZA

salaam alaikum, Ammi

When you died on the morning of the 7th of February 1990, you did so without a fuss, and in silence. Baba told us later that he saw you about to lie down in bed as he went in for a shower, and when he returned, you were gone. You had even arranged yourself with your sari and hair in place, your arms across the chest, your face composed. It was almost as if to tell the living to get on with it and just bury you; a practical, no-nonsense approach to death, as it was to life.

I also know that you passed away believing that both your sons were away—that could not have been a very comforting thought. What you did not know was that I had returned to Bombay the night before but instead of phoning you, as I usually did after a trip, I fell asleep, too tired to make that call.

'Why don't you call Ammi?' Jennifer had asked.

'I'll do it tomorrow,' I had replied.

Tomorrow, as they say, was another day.

Would that phone call have changed the course of events? I don't think so, but it might have been of some solace to you. As for me, it would have been nice to hear your voice one last time. Perhaps this letter is being written because of that missed call. There are so many things I need to talk to you about.

Let me begin with the news. I remember how you always wanted to be absolutely up to date with world events. I remember the one hour you would spend reading your morning Urdu newspaper and the half hour of watching the news on television in the evening. And the frequent discussions you had with Baba on what you had read or seen. So now I am going to tell you about all

that has been happening in the world since you passed away.

The Soviet Union has collapsed, both as an entity and an idea. It happened swiftly. And with it went Eastern Europe. Are you surprised? I am not sure you would be. In fact I can almost hear an 'I told you so'.

The Palestinians are still struggling to create their homeland and the war of attrition with Israel is getting more savage by the day. The experiment of religious coexistence in Yugoslavia has failed and the country has been bloodily divided into several parts. There was horrific ethnic slaughter in Rwanda and there are civil wars in the Aceh province of Indonesia, in Colombia, in the sub-Saharan countries of Africa, in Russian Chechnya, in the Philippines, in the Darfur province of Sudan and a few other countries.

Two countries, Iraq and Afghanistan, were invaded and their ruling regimes overthrown by the United States of America. Argentina's experiment with free trade economics did not quite work out and its economy lies shattered. Peace has emerged in Angola and Namibia after painful wars. The good news is that the apartheid regime in South Africa is over. Nelson Mandela is a free man, and his country and people are free too. Fidel Castro still survives but it seems he is very ill. I wish him well. There was an attempted coup to oust the democratically elected president of Venezuela. He had made the mistake of believing that the profits from his country's oil revenues belonged to the Venezuelan people and not to international oil corporations. The coup failed.

In India, storm troopers brought down the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya saying it was built on the birthplace of Lord Ram. It happened on the 6th of December 1992; I know you will be disturbed by this piece of news but it is true. The event led to casual slaughter, then to organized murder and mayhem, and then to bomb blasts. Since then, the city of Bombay has been renamed Mumbai. The Maoists, popularly called Naxalites, have increased their area of influence in seven states in the very heartland of the country. There has been communal genocide in the state of Gujarat, and the attacks on Dalits and tribals continue. I apologize

for sounding so casual about communal and caste violence but it almost seems as if these attacks on the weak and the vulnerable are considered laws of nature in India because they occur so regularly. Besides, nobody is ever really held accountable. On the financial front, our country has gone on to become part of the global economic system.

At the end of 2004, a tsunami struck several sea-facing parts of Asia and Africa, claiming more than a quarter of a million lives. It was devastating as the monstrous waves destroyed everything in their way. A massive earthquake in Kashmir claimed more than seventy thousand lives in India and Pakistan. A few miracles also occurred in India in 2006, proving the existence of god. The salt water at Mahim Bay in Mumbai suddenly turned sweet and the Muslims of the city were jubilant. They said it was the handiwork of a Muslim saint whose grave lay nearby. Not to be outdone, the idols of various gods in the Hindu pantheon began drinking milk in several temples across the land. A balance was restored and all these divine interventions were a shot in the arm for the faithful.

This is world news in telegraphic form.

I would also like to tell you, in a little detail, about two words that have unusually preoccupied our world for the last ten years. The first you are familiar with: 'Democracy'. When you quietly passed away in 1990, were you aware that you were a citizen of the world's *largest* democracy, India? Perhaps you were not. I think that phrase was coined a couple of years later. Also, were you aware that the United States calls itself the world's *greatest* democracy? I am not sure when the term was first used, but if the United States can lay claim to the word *greatest*, I have no quarrel with *largest*.

I say all this because I remember your faith in the right to vote. I also remember how you exercised it religiously whenever there was an election in India and how, when Baba asked you whom you had voted for, you would say that it was a matter between you and only you and that was that. You and only you: *Main aur main hi.* You always had a smile on your face when you said it and I, as a child, loved the phrase. There was a mystery to it.

I come back to what I was getting at. Over the last few years, the word 'democracy' has taken on a strange urgency and any nation that cannot lay claim to it is in dire trouble. It can be bombed into democracy, it can be economically sanctioned into democracy and it can even be invaded into democracy. (Don't laugh Ammi, what I'm saying is true and it is actually happening.) And, in the early years of our new country, along with democracy, a second word has cropped up and taken centre stage. The word is 'terror'. On 9th September 2001, planes commandeered by men with messianic zeal crashed into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon near Washington DC. Thousands of people died. The result was that a war was declared. It was called the War on Terror and it was led by the United States. The first casualty in this war was a country called Afghanistan: the land of your ancestors. It was invaded and the regime in power was overthrown.

Now, I have nothing to say in favour of the people who ruled the land of your ancestors before they were removed from power. In fact I think I was pleased to see them go. They were called the Taliban. My problem with the American invasion lies elsewhere. In something you had said years ago, about the Americans in Vietnam. You had said that people all over the world have an innate sense of what is good for them and what is not. It can never be imposed from the outside but has to come from within. And that is why the Americans, instead of bombing and killing and destroying like elephants in a sugarcane field, should just get out and leave those people alone.

Having got that out of the way, let me get down to my real purpose for writing to you. You once told me, I think it was in the early 1980s, that I had never written a real letter to you. Though you did receive a few, they were *bahanas* excuses, for the real thing. 'Letters,' you said, 'should be about things that people want to say. Not what they ought to say: "How are you? I am well" or some such rubbish.' I had protested and said that I find it difficult to

express myself in Urdu. I still remember your answer: 'Write in any language, in any way, but express what is in your heart.'

So now, I am going to take a journey for you. A mélange of memories, tales, anecdotes, events and people that have inspired me, saddened me, provoked me, and finally, shaped me and helped me understand my world. As an epilogue I have also tossed in a film script. All told it will be a collage and hopefully, when put together, it will make some sense to you.

But I am in a dilemma. I am presenting this journey to you in English. I know it is a language you do not read or write. And I know how hard you tried to speak it. You would pick up words and phrases from all kinds of conversations and contexts, intuitively try to fathom their meanings, and then string them together to fashion a sentence. When it worked, you would look at the family triumphantly. And so often, it did. When it didn't work, you would just laugh and say Urdu is a superior language. It is, Ammi, it is.

The problem is that my knowledge of Urdu is inadequate, and I think the fault is yours. You slyly made sure that your children studied in a school where the medium of instruction was English. It was not just any school but one that was considered amongst the best in Bombay, even though it was one which you and Baba found difficult to afford. Logically, from there we went on to a college where the medium of instruction was the same. Yet I know you secretly despaired at what you had done. Those tentative classes in Urdu that I had at home were, I think, your attempt to somehow stem the tide that you knew would inevitably follow.

So this letter and the following journey in English might pose some problems for you, for which I apologize. But I know you will understand. It is a price we both have paid: you, for the partial loss of your son, and I for drifting away because of a language. And not just drifting away but for feeling that I was in a superior world. This letter is an attempt to make amends for so many things.

My other dilemma is that you died in 1990. now, as a rationalist, who am I writing this letter to? I do not know. I do not know. But why do I feel there are times when I distinctly sense

you hovering around me? So often, when I pass that photograph of yours in my home, I have stopped and said ‘salaam alaikum, Ammi,’ and heard a whispered reply, ‘wa alaikum as-salaam. Saddu.’ Can you believe it, Ammi’? How can a damned rationalist like me believe in spirits!

I think I see you smiling.

Your son,

Saeed

the journey

I begin with two memories of my childhood. Don't ask me why, because I do not know. Perhaps because it helps to get things started.

growing up slightly diffused

I am about three years old and I am being given a bath. I scream: the soap hurts my eyes and I can't see. I recall the voice that says 'It's over, it's over.' And then, after quick bursts of water from a mug that clears away the mist, I see her smiling face.

'See? It's over.'

Then comes the quick nuzzle and the hug.

'You were so brave,' she says.

I feel brave too, so I smile.

Then a huge towel is used to dry me. With the towel come a few more hugs. I like that. And then comes the part I like the most. It is the talcum powder from the little pink tin with holes on the top. I like the smell as it is greatly showered over me. I feel good. I get another hug and kiss.

'Some more powder, Ammi.'

Some more is quickly showered.

'A little more?'

'Enough,' she answers with a smile.

Soon I am wearing a shirt and shorts as she sings me a song:

Saeed saab ban gaye gentlemain,
Saeed saab ban gaye gentlemain.
Do paise ki ghadi lagaayi,
Teen paise ki chain.
Saeed saab ban gaye gentlemain.

I love the song because it makes me feel important. Yes, Ammi. Saeed sahib has become a gentleman, because he is wearing a two-pice watch and a three-pice chain.

It is so easy to become a gentlemain.

the frilled shirt

I am the centre of attention once again. I am five-and-a-half years old and the entire family is watching me closely. There is Baba, Ammi, my elder sister Talat and my elder brother Aziz. It is my first day of school and they survey me in my brand new, bottle-green, ribbed velvet shorts with suspenders and white silk shirt with frills in the front. It is Ammi's creation. I see myself in the mirror of the tall wooden cupboard and I think I look good.

'Wah!' says Baba, and winks.

I smile.

Ammi sits down to make some last-minute adjustments to the suspenders and gives me a hug. And I am off to school. As we walk down the road, Talat, Aziz and I, I turn back to look at my home. At the corner window, on the first floor, stand Baba and Ammi. They smile as they wave to me. I smile and wave back.

It is at school that Ammi's creation is attacked by a critic.

'You look like a girl,' says the five-and-a-half-yearold boy.

I punch him for saying that. And there is a fight in the class as the other children watch. We fight till we are pulled apart by a lovely lady in a long dress. I think I got the better of the critic because after that he treated me with respect and also offered me sweets occasionally. But on that day my shirt is torn, my shorts dirtied and both of us are punished by the lovely lady. We are asked to stand outside the class. We continue our fight outside, but this time verbally and in whispers.

'I'll tell my big brother about you,' he says.

'I'll tell my big brother too.'

'How big is he?'

‘He’s bigger than your brother.’

‘Quiet!’ shouts the lovely lady from inside the classroom.

We keep silent but glare at each other.

On the way home from school, the enormity of what I have done hits me. The onslaught comes from my sister who is ten years old.

‘Why did you have to fight?’ she asks.

‘He called me a girl.’

‘I’m glad you hit him,’ says Aziz, who is two years older than me.

‘Shut up,’ says Talat, the boss. ‘Do you know how hard Ammi worked on your clothes?’

I keep quiet. But my sister is relentless.

‘She worked for two whole days! Two whole days!’

I remain silent.

‘And for one whole night. She didn’t sleep,’ she adds.

‘It wasn’t the whole night,’ I protest.

‘Shut up,’ she says.

I shut up. But she continues.

‘How hard she worked, while you slept peacefully. Peeeacefully!’

I start feeling guilty. She continues.

‘The shirt was made of silk. Do you know how much that shirt and shorts cost?’

I keep silent. I do not know the cost.

I do remember Ammi sitting at the sewing machine one day after lunch. In about two hours she has the shorts ready, ribbing and all, and she makes me try them on. In another twenty minutes, with a few changes, they are ready. I am impressed. The next day, after lunch, Ammi sits to tailor the shirts. I say shirts because she has bought material for two, one for Aziz and one for me. She has both the shirts ready by five in the evening, including the pockets.

We try them out. They are fine. Why did my sister have to say 'two whole days'?

It is at dinner time, the day the shirts are ready, that Ammi makes the announcement. 'There's some cloth left over and I'm going to give Saddu a surprise.' I look at her and she smiles. I am curious. After dinner she is back at the sewing machine. I go to sleep. In the morning I see the surprise. A frilled front has been added to my shirt. And I know it didn't take 'the whole night' to do so. I think it was because of the frilled front that the critic called me a girl. That is what led to the fight. And to the torn clothes.

The three of us get home from school. And promptly, on being told abut the fight, I am thumped by Ammi. It's my shoulder that takes the thumping and it hurts. I look at her in surprise and I am thumped again. I begin to cry. I walk away to our bedroom and lie down in bed. And I wait. It's a ploy that always works. Soon she will come and say she is sorry. She doesn't come. I wait. She doesn't come. I wait and wait. I hear Baba arriving home and I can hear voices but I can't hear what is being said. Baba comes up to the door of our bedroom and pauses. I pretend to be sleeping. He walks away. He doesn't come in. But Aziz does. It is his room too. He looks at me and asks, 'Did you hammer him?' I nod. 'Good,' he says and leaves. It is dinner time by now and Baba calls out to me. I don't reply. He comes over to my bed, looks at me and says, 'Come to the dining table.' I do so because I am hungry, and also because I think waiting to be consoled is not going to work.

The family is at the dining table as I enter. I quietly take my place and the plate of food is put before me. I keep my eyes lowered but I know everyone is looking at me. I eat silently. At some point I glance up towards Ammi. She looks at me too. I decide to make up with her.

'I'm sorry,' I say. 'I won't do it again.'

Ammi and Baba nod.

'Were the clothes very expensive?' I ask, looking at Ammi.

There is no answer and then she begins to cry. We all look at

her. She gets up from the table and leaves.

a story of love

This is a story abut a young man and a young woman, and how they met and fell in love with each other. It is also a story about a time and a place. I heard parts of it while growing up and parts of it from other 'sources'. How much of it is true and how much a fantasy, I do not know. What I do know is that listening to it made me feel good. It gave me a sense of belonging—somewhere, somehow.

how a story of love began

It was December 1932. The United States of America was still reeling from the effects of the stockmarket crash with hundreds of bankruptcies, thousands of factories shut down and millions of people out of work. Franklin Roosevelt's 'New Deal' had just about started. In the Soviet Union, Trotsky was on the run and Stalin had consolidated his hold on the Bolshevik Party and the country. Hitler and his thugs had almost come to power in Germany. A few months later, they would burn down the Reichstag, blame the arson on the communists and complete the coup. It would be a classic example of killing two birds with one stone. In India, a man called Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi had emerged from almost nowhere and was being hailed as a messiah by the poor of the land.

The time was December 1932. The place was the Convocation Hall of a university in north India. The hall was dark, except for the stage where the student-poets sat. The light on the stage came from two large oil lamps on either side. Dressed in dark sherwanis and stylishly cut broad pajamas and wearing all kinds of elaborate headgear like the fez, the Persian safa or turban, the Kashmiri astrakhan or the elongated darwaish cap, the young poets sat facing the darkness of the hall where a large congregation of fellow-students had gathered to hear them. Among the audience was Nusrat Beg. He and his friends Aijaz Khan and Rasheed Durrani stood at the back of the hall observing the proceedings. All three were dressed in shirts and trousers and wore sweaters. Rasheed also wore a tie. All three wore shoes with laces.

On the stage, Aftab Jalili, the outgoing president of the students' body, dressed in a black sherwani, Aligarhi pajamas and

Peshawari sandals, got up to speak. The three friends at the back of the hall looked at each other and smiled. Aftab Jalili bowed before the audience and put his right hand to his heart.

'Friends,' he said, 'this mehfil is the grand finale that we hold every year after the convocation. Every year, as is the custom, we present the poetry of those students who dare to present their work in front of all of you. I say "dare" because this hall has, over the years, witnessed the musings of masters. We have heard the verses of Ghalib and Mir and Zauq. Even the great Iqbal has spent an evening here. This hall is scared, therefore, and these students know it. When they present their thoughts to us they know that the standards that have been set here are very high. Yes, I know they are students but that will not deter us from judging them.'

'Do we have the right to heckle them if they are terrible poets?' asked a voice from the dark. There was a murmur across the hall. Aftab looked in the direction from which the voice had emerged and smiled.

'Aha,' he said. 'I smell the voice of one of the "Lords". Are they in the hall?'

'We are,' said Nusrat Beg.

'I knew it. I can smell you out. You people are such great fans of the English, you even wipe your "you know what" with paper. But you don't do a very good job of it. That's why I can smell you out.'

The crowd in the hall laughed. Rasheed Durrani smiled too and shouted back.

'It's a great weapon. It is what the English used against our armies. That's how they beat us every time.'

There was more laughter in the hall. Aftab Jalili shook his head.

'I like your sense of humour. But pray tell me, what brings you people here? This is an evening of Urdu poetry of which you know very little.'

'Enough to know the good from the bad,' growled Nusrat.

'We are here to make sure the poetry recited tonight doesn't degenerate into maudlin love potions of the past,' shouted Aijaz

Khan.

'No more variations of Laila Majnu,' said Rasheed.

There was a murmur in the hall. And then a loud voice was heard.

'Throw the loveless bastards out!'

'There was more laughter and sounds of approval.'

'Did you hear that?' asked Aftab.

'We did and we pity him,' said Nusrat, 'for he knows no better.'

'And I suppose you do.'

'You're absolutely right!'

'All right, what kind of poetry would you prefer?'

'We want poetry for the future.'

'Pray, can you tell me what you mean by "poetry for the future"?'

'It is poetry that understands change and welcomes it. It is poetry that realizes the horse has given way to the car and the steam engine!'

Aftab Jalili smiled sarcastically.

'Do you want them to write poems to machines?'

The hall burst out laughing. Nusrat Beg smiled too.

'There's a saying in English, it's better than flogging a dead horse.'

Aftab Jalili raised his hand and nodded.

'Aha! I think I understand what you are hinting at. What you want is poetry that reflects our times, am I right?'

'Absolutely,' said Rasheed Durrani.

'But tell me, what if the poetry doesn't meet your incredibly high standards?'

'We will heckle them!'

Aftab turned to the rest of the congregation.

'Do they have the right to heckle? Will you allow them this freedom?'

'NNNOOOO,' roared the students in the hall. Aftab smiled.

'You have your answer.'

'It's a pity,' shouted Nusrat. 'Just remember, if any of these

fellows goes on to become a terrible poet, the fault lies with you.'

The crowd booed loudly as the three 'Lords' trooped out of the hall: all three with fresh Master's degrees in English with history as a minor and all three approximately twenty-two years old.

Emerging from the hall and into the night, Rasheed smiled.

'At least we said what we had to say.'

Nusrat shook his head.

'Pity we couldn't stay. One of those fellows has good potential.'

'Which one?' asked Aijaz.

'He calls himself Changezi. I think he's a communist.'

'You think he is?' whispered Aijaz.

Nusrat nodded. Aijaz and Rasheed looked at each other. Nusrat had always wondered about the respect the word 'communist' commanded. He could see it now on the faces of his two friends. Communists, as people, were considered irreverent and iconoclastic, and a great many of the traditionalists at the university did not quite know how to deal with them, but they were respected for what they were doing in a land colonized by the British. Recently they had started a campaign targeting British interests and symbols, and had made quite an impact across the country. The trial and execution of the fiery revolutionary Bhagat Singh had added to their aura. Young poets, writers and academics had begun discussing their ideology. A fairly large segment of the student population at universities had secretly begun reading their literature and there were constant raids by the police and the authorities to track them down,

'God bless him,' said Rasheed.

'Are you asking God to bless an atheist?' asked Aijaz.

Nusrat laughed.

The three friends walked silently towards the university gates. It was their last night together and the thought of their departure to different destinations the next morning was weighing heavy on their minds. For five years they had studied the same courses.

Together, they had discovered the magic of Chaucer and Shakespeare and Dickens. They had talked about the elegance of Keats, Shelley, Browning and Byron. Later they would read translations of Pushkin, Gorky, Balzac and Maupassant. They had also celebrated the exuberance of the recently translated works of the poet Mayakovsky. Their political heroes were Lincoln and Kemal Atatürk.

But secretly, very secretly, they also reserved the greatest respect for the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad and the Umayyads in Spain. It happened when a professor of history talked to them about that glorious period when science, mathematics, philosophy and literature had come together to create a magnificent symphony. The three friends spent months discussing and reading about those times. At the end of the fourth year they even formed a secret society, 'The Modernists', which the other students derisively called the 'Lords'. By the end of the fifth year they came to the conclusion that Islam as a religion had lost its vigour because it had fallen into the hands of archaic interpreters whose pronouncements on its laws only served the needs of decadent kings and despots. A dynamic and egalitarian religion, a religion of enquiry, had been reduced to a shadow of itself. There was almost no room for reforms, no room for a fresh impetus to discovery and learning. The only space it allowed was for bad poetry.

The three friends passed through the university gates and paused. It was cold. Nusrat rubbed his hands together and turned to the other two.

'We were booed out of the hall, gentlemen,' he said. 'But let me tell you something that will cheer you up.'

He paused dramatically.

'The future is ours,' he said.

There was a moment of silence and then the three of them whispered, almost in chorus, 'Ameen'.

Outside the gates stood the usual line of tongas. They boarded one. The tonga driver, an elderly man, clicked his tongue

and the horse carriage began to move.

'Where to, young scholars?'

'Wherever your horse will take us,' said Rasheed.

The driver laughed.

'The only place it can go blindfolded is to the homes of the singing girls.'

The three friends looked at each other and smiled.

'So be it,' said Rasheed. 'Let tonight be a night of decadence, for tomorrow we depart.'

'And how do we pay for this night of decadence?' asked Nusrat.

'With the profits of my father's leather business!' said Aijaz.

'Long live your father's business! Let skin pay for the voices of tuneless singers and terrible songs.'

The next morning Rasheed Durrani would leave for Bhopal, Aijaz Khan for Kanpur and Nusrat Beg for Quetta. It would be in Quetta that Nusrat would find a travelling companion.

It was a December morning in Quetta and it was cold. In the large haveli, in a cavernous room, sat Jahanara, a tall seventeen-year-old girl, and two other young women. Shahbobo, the old matriarch, reclined in a corner on a thick mattress, her huge body propped against long pillows, and kept a watchful eye on their work. Rolls and rolls of cloth lay scattered all over the room as the young girls measured, cut and stitched. It was the annual ritual. Eight sets of shalwars and shirts for each of the matriarch's five sons. Six sets of shalwars, dupattas and kameezes with embroidery for every one of their wives. And six sets of clothes for the nineteen children: there were five boys, three girls and eleven smaller children between the ages of twelve and three. Soon there would be one more child. The wife of Shahbobo's youngest son was about to have her second child. Eight sets of baby clothes were to be made for it too. Then four sets for the matriarch, the mother of five men. The job had to be done by the three girls who had come of age: Jahanara, who was going to be seventeen, Asmat, her

sister, who was fifteen and Nikhat, a cousin, who was fifteen too.

Jahanara glanced towards the door of the room which opened out into the central courtyard. Sitting just outside the door, in the sunlight, was eight-year-old Ghazala. In front of her was a large mound of raw white rice mixed with red dal. She was busy separating the two and making two smaller mounds. 'Rice—dal, rice— dal,' she kept whispering to herself. In about two hours she would be done. Jahanara smiled to herself. It was something she had been through herself, as a young girl, for a whole month. The matriarch would mix the two grains in a large degchi and order one of the girls to separate them. The girl would spend hours at it and present it to the matriarch who would congratulate her and then promptly remix the two for the girl to repeat the exercise the next day. Each girl child had to go through the ritual. 'It's good for the mind,' said the matriarch. 'It helps you concentrate.'

Jahanara went back to her cutting and sewing. She wanted to stretch out and take a break, but, under the watchful eye of the matriarch, she decided she'd better not. Her fingers ached. The matriarch shifted her position on the mattress and announced to the three girls:

'He will be coming tomorrow.'

'Who, Dadi?' asked Jahanara.

'The princess's brother,' said the matriarch.

Jahanara smiled to herself. 'Princess' was the word used by the matriarch to describe the wife of her younger son, Jamal Khan. She was a Mughal and that was bad enough for the matriarch who firmly believed that Pathans and Mughals were of different species. Besides, this Mughal came from a family of historians and teachers. They read books. They owned no land, no houses and no herds.

'He will be here for ten days,' said the matriarch, 'so make sure the three of you stay in the zenana. You will not see him.'

Jahanara smiled again. She was about eight years old when her uncle Jamal Khan, her father's younger brother and a

confirmed bachelor until then, had decided to get married, at the age of thirty-eight. Amongst all the brothers, he was the one who was different. He was a college graduate who went on to study law and, at the age of thirty-two, had become a judge. Initially the matriarch did not approve of all the studying and reading, but when he became a judge, she was proud of him. It brought prestige to the family. But then Jamal Khan went on to take a decision that truly shocked the matriarch. He began to organize the education of all the girls in the household. Women teachers were hired from the local missionary school to teach them at home. The matriarch was outraged. 'What will they do with all this learning?' she demanded. Jamal Khan smiled and said nothing. 'How will they find husbands?' she asked. He smiled again and said nothing.

And then Jamal Khan went on to make his greatest blunder. Instead of marrying a Pathan girl from a good family, and there were so many who were willing to do so, he married the daughter of an itinerant Mughal scholar, Safdar Beg. Jamal Khan had met the scholar several times in his college hostel, and they had discussed photography and religion and history and literature. Apart from these heady discussions, he also had time to notice the scholar's daughter. Her name was Rukhsana. She was beautiful and intelligent. Very often she and her younger brother, who was still a schoolboy, would join in the discussions. He had never met a person like her. Jamal Khan, at the age of thirty-seven and being a judge of repute, fell madly in love with seventeen-yearold Rukhsana. 'Besotted,' as the matriarch would say. And then one day, the scholar Safdar Beg died. That's when Jamal Khan, despite opposition from his mother, decided to marry the scholar's daughter. At the age of eighteen, Rukhsana entered the Khan clan as a bride. She had almost no trousseau: just one gold necklace and a trunk full of books.

'Books?' the matriarch asked herself. 'Not an ounce of anything else and she has books?' To add to her rage, for five years, Jamal Khan financed Rukhsana's younger brother, Nusrat Beg's college education. He paid for his board, lodge and tuition fees. In fact, he paid for everything. And now the young man was coming

to visit his sister and her husband. One more scrounging Mughal!

Jahanara remembered the arrival of her aunt Rukhsana. She was just eighteen years old and yet she had the authority of someone much older. She rarely spoke Pashto, the language of the matriarch, preferring to speak in Urdu and Farsi. This, Jahanara knew, irritated the matriarch. 'What's wrong with Pashto?' she would mutter. Another difference about this aunt was her subtle choice of words that somehow made even the most ordinary statement sound so poetic. A common 'come in' would become a 'please present yourself'. There were times when Jahanara would strike up a conversation just so that she could hear the fluidity of her aunt's language. She also noticed the way Rukhsana ate: every morsel gracefully picked up with just the tips of her thumb, fore and middle fingers, the other two fingers delicately poised above the food. And her walk, which was more of a glide. Jahanara tried to imitate it in front of a mirror, back and forth, but somehow she couldn't quite manage the grace. But this elegant aunt was also a sophisticated 'work thief'. So often she would get Jahanara to do chores that she could well have done herself. So often she would feign illness when she was required in the kitchen. 'Look at her airs,' the matriarch would mutter. 'She's come with nothing and yet she acts like a princess. If a fly sits on her forehead, she falls ill.'

And yet, this was the aunt who introduced Jahanara to the world of literature.

It started one afternoon when Jahanara, at the age of ten, entered her aunt's bedroom and found her reading a book that had all kinds of illustrations and drawings.

'What are you reading, Chachijaan?' she asked.

'It's a book on the travels of Al Beruni.'

'Who is he?'

'Who *was* he,' Rukhsana corrected Jahanara. 'He was a scholar who lived hundreds of years ago and he travelled to many, many countries and wrote about them. He wrote about the people who

lived there, their customs, the crops they grew, the food they ate and even the clothes they wore.'

Jahanara nodded pretending to understand but she knew she hadn't. Then curiosity got the better of her.

'Why did he do that?'

'He was curious. He felt there was a lot to learn about the world and that the best way to do it was to travel.'

Rukhsana pointed to a table that was piled high with all kinds of books.

'I have a lot of wonderful books with me. Unfortunately they are not in Pashto. Would you like me to read some of them to you?'

Jahanara hesitated. What would the matriarch say? And then she nodded.

That was the beginning.

She started with the tales of *A Thousand and One Nights*. Then she moved on to the stories of Caliph Harun al-Rashid. She learnt about the crusades and the gallantry of Salah ad-Din, and about the wisdom of the Sufis Jalaluddin Rumi and Amir Khusrau. She heard fascinating accounts of the empress Razia Sultan and the Princess Roshanara, and the epic love story of Shireen and Farhad. It was a world full of romance and adventure and dreams.

It was a world so different from that of her family. There were no books in their home except those meant for their tuitions. The Pathans were a family of doers. Both men and women worked with their hands. They built their own homes and made their own furniture: beds, tables, chairs, dastarkhwans. They sewed their own clothes, cooked their own food, farmed their own fields and even made their own ploughs and threshers. They slaughtered their cattle for the meat and skinned the animals too, themselves. They were good horsemen. They were experienced ironsmiths and welders, and in times of wars or clan feuds, they manufactured their own weapons in makeshift workshops. They could completely dismantle a vehicle and assemble it again, and they could repair sewing machines and pumps, rifles and occasional motor car. Theirs was a world of the frontier.

'JAHANARA!' shouted the matriarch. 'Where are you, child?'

'Right here. Bobojaan.'

'No, you are not. You were dreaming. Come here, I want to talk to you.'

Jahanara got up from her stitching and went up to her grandmother.

'Look child,' whispered the matriarch, 'what I said about that brother of your aunt was meant only for you. Do you understand?'

Jahanara nodded, but asked.

'Why only for me, Grandma?'

'I'm not sure, but I have a suspicion about the aunt of yours. Don't trust these Mughals. Their women only scheme and plot. And their men are degenerates. Wine and women, song and dance, that's all they want! That's how the Mughal empire was lost!'

Jahanara nodded as the matriarch continued.

'You will not be seen by him, is that clear?'

Jahanara nodded again.

Ammi, I'll take a small break here. Isn't this a great beginning to a story of love? As a child, I was completely captivated by the inherent drama. It had Pathans versus Mughals. It had the rich versus the poor. What was going to happen now? These were the two young people, Nusrat Beg and Jahanara. But how different they were! It seemed almost impossible for their story to go any further, but it did. The plot thickens.

That evening, as usual, the entire clan of five brothers, their wives and their children, along with the matriarch, assembled for dinner. Though each brother had a separate two-storeyed home within the enclosed compound, there was a common kitchen. Dinner was served in the home of the eldest brother, where the matriarch also lived. The men settled down in a circle on a

dastarkhwan spread out in the large, cavernous hall. The five young boys and the eleven smaller children joined them and so did the matriarch. The brothers' wives and the three teenaged girls had to serve. They would eat later. In the centre of circle lay the food: kababs, a mutton korma, dal, rice and naans. For a salad, there were large pieces of radish, onions and carrots. The eldest son of the matriarch, Attaullah Khan, looked around to see if everyone had settled and then quietly said, 'Bismillah'. The others murmured the prayer too and the meal began.

Jahanara looked at her father Amanullah Khan, the second eldest son. He was a tall, raw-boned man with a moustache and trimmed beard. Jahanara observed him as he ate. His right hand would expertly pick up a large morsel and with one swift movement it would enter his mouth. He would chew it for a while and then down it went. In between the eating, he would occasionally pick up a glass of water with his left hand and drink. She looked at her other uncles. It was the same with them too. She hadn't noticed these things before but now it began to irritate her a little. Couldn't they take the time to taste the food? Except for her uncle, Jamal Khan, who ate slowly and in a measured way, the others seemed to have no time for the meal. Jahanara looked at her father again.

'I made the korma, Babajaan,' she said.

Her father stopped in the midst of chewing and smiled.

'You did, jaanu? That's why it is so good.'

'If it is so good, why don't you eat it more slowly?'

The question took everyone by surprise. The men looked at each other and then at Amanullah Khan. He looked at Jahanara and nodded solemnly. And then he continued to eat, but in exaggerated slow motion. Everyone burst out laughing. So did Jahanara.

'Are you happy?' her father asked.

Jahanara just smiled. Amanullah Khan went back to his earlier rhythm of eating.

Who would have guessed that at this dinner a sequence of events would unfold that would have an impact on the lives of everyone present? Most of all on the life of Jahanara? It began when Jamal Khan made an announcement.

'Nusrat Beg, my brother-in-law, will be arriving tomorrow.'

The clan members looked at him.

'Inshallah,' said the eldest brother.

The other brothers nodded and repeated, 'Inshallah'.

'And he will be staying with me,' added Jamal Khan. 'He has just got his Master's degree and I have found him a job as a teacher in the Government School at Sibi.'

His brothers nodded their heads at the information but seemed to be unimpressed. Jahanara glanced at her aunt Rukhsana who was following the conversation closely. She guessed there was more to follow. There was. Jamal Khan then turned to look at Jahanara's father.

'Brother,' he said, 'he is a fine young man and I think he would make a good match for Jahanara.'

There was a moment of silence. And then all the women and eighteen children turned to look at Jahanara. She was both surprised and embarrassed. The five men looked at each other. Shahbobo, the matriarch, watched her second eldest son anxiously. All the women and eighteen children now turned to look at Amanullah Khan too. They were waiting for his response. Amanullah Khan took his time.

'A teacher,' he said quietly to himself. He thought for a little longer and then came the answer.

'No.'

The matriarch was relieved. The men and children went back to their meal.

Nothing more was said. Jahanara quietly walked away into an inner room and sat down on the bed. She didn't know what to think. She recalled what her grandmother had said just that morning. It was not the talk of her wedding that had surprised her. In Pathan families plans are made for a girl's wedding when she

turns twelve. Other clans are consulted, a choice is made and a pledge given. Then, at the age of sixteen or seventeen the girl is married. Jahanara knew that proposals of marriage had come for her, but they had been rejected. She had often wondered about the kind of boy her family would choose for her: from which family and which clan would he be? Now, she wondered, what was her aunt's younger brother like? And why had the matriarch warned her?

Jahanara remembered him from the time she had seen him, when he came for his sister's wedding. He must have been fourteen or fifteen years old then and she about nine. He was a bit aloof, unlike other exuberant Pathan boys his age. The one thing about him that was etched in her memory was his reaction to the slaughter of sheep that took place in the central courtyard, in preparation for the grand feast. As the slaughter began, amidst the noise and mayhem of the high-pitched bleating of animals and the torrent of blood, he had vomited. How the other children had laughed at him!

He had come to Quetta once again after that, about two years ago. By then he was a university student, nineteen or twenty years old. Jahanara was not allowed to meet him because she had come of age. But she did get to see him. He had grown much taller since his last visit, but what she found really funny was to see him walking around on the terrace of her uncle's house in shorts, a shirt and shoes with stockings almost up to his knees. He looked like an English sahib. And now he was coming again.

It was late in the evening and getting dark when Nusrat Beg got down from the bus at the Quetta bus station. He was tired from his journey. It had been a twenty-two-hour trip from Amritsar. He unloaded his holdall and two trunks from the bus and looked around for a tonga. He spotted one and waved to the driver. The man noticed him but did not move. Nusrat waved

again. The driver did not budge. So, carrying his luggage across himself, he loaded it on to the horse carriage piece after piece. The driver, a young man, dressed in a shalwar kameez and woolen cap and wrapped in a shawl, just sat there watching him. Nusrat spoke to him in Pashto.

'Don't you help your passengers with their luggage?' he asked.

The driver shook his head.

'No.'

'May I ask why?'

'Because, when I see passengers like you it gives me great pleasure not to be of help.'

Nusrat Beg got into the tonga and the horse carriage began to move.

'Where to?' asked the driver. Nusrat Beg did not answer the question. Instead, he asked, 'What do you mean by passengers like me?'

'Look at you,' said the driver. 'You look like a monkey.'

Nusrat Beg laughed. He was wearing his only woolen coat, a shirt and sweater, trousers and shoes.

'What's wrong with this?'

'It is the dress of the English bastards!'

Nusrat was taken aback by the vehemence of the response.

'Where are you from?' he asked the driver.

'From across the line, Afghanistan. May smallpox wipe out their entire race! Where to?'

'The home of Judge Jamal Khan.'

The driver turned to look at him.

'Are you a relative of his?'

'Yes. My sister is married to him.'

'He is a good man,' said the driver, 'one of the few in this bloody Raj. The rest are toadies.'

Nusrat smiled. But he still wondered about the man's anger. Quetta was the last outpost of the British Indian empire and a little beyond, across the border, was Afghanistan. For the last hundred years the empire had tried to subdue the tribes on the other side of the line and had failed. Several wars had been fought and lost, and

Quetta had been the launching pad for the failed invasions. A large military garrison was stationed in this sprawling town that lay in a valley surrounded by hills. The garrison and the civilian quarters of the British were cordoned off from the rest of the populace by a broad encircling ditch and then an encircling wall. The empire was taking no chance with an enemy who could be anywhere, across the line or on this side of it. Apart from the garrison, Quetta was basically a Baluch town. This was their land and the tribes people formed the major part of the population. But war and a busy trade route between India, China and Persia had brought a host of buccaneers, adventurers, traders, doctors, lawyers and teachers. And so there were also Pathans, Mughals, Punjabis, Arabs, Sikhs, Sindhis, Turkmen, Iranian and Iraqi Jews, Afghans, Persians and Bengalis. And about two hundred White Russians who were waiting to go back to their motherland once the Bolshevik revolution was overthrown.

In the dusk of that cold December day, Nusrat could barely recognize the town, shrouded as it was in a thick haze. The last time he was here Jamal Khan had taken him around Quetta, and he had been able to see quite a bit of it. Most of the homes were one storey high and built of mud, stone and clay. They were rectangular or square, with an internal courtyard and rooms all around. The flat roofs were used to dry washed clothes and linen during the day. At night, in summer, the terraces were transformed into dormitories, where families slept to escape the heat. The homes of the wealthy were bigger, two or three storeys high, but their terraces too served the same function. The really well-off, those whom the driver of the tonga had referred to as ‘toadies’, had two or more homes enclosed by a surrounding wall. They were the contractors, suppliers, senior police officers who sometimes moonlighted as contractors, moneylenders, senior civic officials, merchants and traders. And then there were the pimps. The troops of the empire needed to be entertained, so there was a small colony of prostitutes, originally from faraway Nepal and

Bihar, who had been brought in for the purpose. Every weekend they were driven to the garrison in trucks and supplied to the troops in their barracks. On weekdays they served the needs of the rest of the populace. Every five years, in faded glory, they were sent back home and fresh lot brought in.

The driver of the tonga turned round to look at Nusrat.

'What brings you here?' he asked.

'I've just graduated and I have a job in Sibi, and before I go there I wanted to meet my sister.'

'Aha! So you're a talib? So tell me mister scholar, what are these English bastards doing here in our land?'

'They are ruling us.'

'Did anybody ask them to?'

'No one did. They came here to trade and they ended up ruling us.'

'How did it happen?'

'It happened because most of our rulers were also bastards.'

The driver paused so think it over.

'Maybe our rulers were bastards, but at least they were our bastards.'

'True. But tell me, why do you hate these new bastards so much?'

The driver thought for a moment again.

'I was told they eat pork, they defile our mosques and rape our women.'

'Do they?'

'Don't they?'

'The pork part of it is true. I am not so sure of the rest.'

'Are you on their side?'

'No. I am not. All I am saying is that they can be bastards and they can also be civilized. They're not bastards all the time, and they're not civilized all the time.'

The driver laughed

'Spoken like a scholar,' he said. 'You take both sides.'

They rode on in silence. Nusrat turned his thoughts to the letter he had received from his sister about a week ago. There was some mystery to it.

Besides congratulating him on his graduation and his impending teaching assignment, there was a mention of a surprise awaiting him when he reached Quetta. He wondered what his sister could be talking about. Soon the carriage reached the outer gate of the Khan fortress and stopped. Nusrat Beg got off and paid the driver. He turned around to see a smiling Jamal Khan and two retainers standing at the gate. Nusrat smiled back. On seeing him now, Nusrat Beg was struck by how much he really owed the man. For five years Jamal Khan had borne all the expenses of his education, and for five years, they had corresponded regularly. Initially the letters were formal but soon they became occasions for debate and discussion on literature, philosophy, science and religion. They had become very good friends. Nusrat hurried forward and the two men hugged each other.

'Salaam alaikum,' said Nusrat.

'Wa alaikum as-salaam,' whispered Jamal.

It was at dinner in Jamal Khan's home that the mystery hidden in his sister's letter was finally revealed. Nusrat Beg heard of the failed attempt to get him married. He sighed in relief.

'I'm glad I was rejected. It will be quite a while before I can think of marriage.'

'Spoken like a fool,' said Jamal.

Nusrat was surprised by the response. Jamal Khan continued.

'My dear young scholar. I know that opportunities come and go. That's the way life is. But there are some that are critical. And if they pass you by, you are the loser forever. I believe this one was. Please grant this brother-in-law of yours some intelligence when he takes a decision on your behalf.'

Nusrat smiled.

'Why did you select her?'

'Because she is a very sensible young girl,' said Rukhsana.

Nusrat looked at his brother-in-law. Jamal Khan nodded.

'That was a part of my reason too.'

'And the other part?'

'I think I know you well enough and I felt you would need a long-distance travelling partner. She has the qualities to be one.'

Nusrat looked at Jamal Khan trying to fathom what he meant.

'Can you elaborate a little, Abbu Mian?'

'I can't. Call it intuition. I think I know you and I think I know her. I thought this would be good for both of you. Remember, she is my niece and love her very much too.'

Nusrat thought it over.

'How old is she?' he asked.

'Seventeen.'

'Haven't there been proposals for her?'

'Yes, but I shot them down.'

'There were two when she was fifteen. Two last year and one just two months ago,' Rukhsana added.

Nusrat laughed. Jamal smiled too.

'The opinion of a judge carries weight. I was waiting for you to graduate. But this time my opinion . . . a pity . . . ah, all those plans . . .'

Jamal Khan got up.

'Shabbakhair,' he murmured, as he left.

'Khuda hafiz,' said Nusrat. He watched Jamal Khan leave and then turned to his sister.

'He is really upset.'

'So am I,' whispered his sister. 'They are jahils.'

Nusrat looked at her in surprise. He thought he hadn't heard her correctly.

'Did you say jahils, Apa?'

'I did. They are just savages with a lot of land and wealth.'

'You married into this family, dear sister.'

'I know and don't try to be sarcastic, Nusrat. You know my husband is not like the rest of them. Her father took just seconds to reject the proposal! Seconds! They'd rather have a belching boor as

her husband. You know, I've been here six years and not once has that chudail been polite to me.'

'Who are you talking about?'

'Shahbobo. She is one with the venom and she spreads it liberally. She believes our family counts for nothing.'

'If I know you Apa, I am sure you have done your bit to stir the pot too. Haven't you?'

'You think I would let them get away with their sarcasm? When I sit with those sheep in the kitchen, it's such a pleasure slipping in a quote from the classics. You should see their faces when I do so.'

Nusrat shook his head and smiled.

'Apa, maybe you are the reason they rejected me.'

Later, as he lay in bed, Nusrat recalled the phrase used by Jamal Khan: 'a long-distance travelling partner.' He liked it. It came from a Persian couplet that measured the love between a man and a woman to distances travelled together. Love was not the beginning of a journey but the consequences of one. It grew and flourished along the way. If there was no journey travelled, there was no love. Nusrat fell asleep, he was very tired.

It was fairly early in the morning when he was woken up by a series of sounds. Glancing down from his window he could see the courtyard of the adjoining house. There, in the biting cold, stood a young girl and an elderly maid, filling up buckets of water to get the hammams ready for the morning baths. From his window at an angle, Nusrat had a partial view of the bathhouse. He could see that a coal fire had been lit at the base of a huge tin-and-copper container which had a large central funnel. The girl was pouring buckets of water at rapid speed into the hammam. Was that Jahanara, Nusrat wondered. He tried to get a better look but, with her work done, the girl had entered the bathhouse and shut the door. The maid left and Nusrat Beg lay down on his bed once more and shut his eyes. He could faintly hear the sound of water being splashed. Then there was silence. Once again water being splashed.

And silence again. She's had her bath and she must be changing her clothes now, thought Nusrat. He got up and sat at the window to get a good view of her as she emerged. Was it Jahanara, he wondered again. The door of the bathhouse remained shut for quite a long time. Nusrat was surprised. How long did it take her to change her clothes? He looked at the roof of the bathhouse. There was no smoke coming out of the chimney. That was strange. With a coal fire on, there had to be smoke. There was none. Nusrat was now both alert and curious.

The maid re-emerged from the interior of the house, walked up to the door of the bathhouse and knocked, 'Jahanarajaan?' There was no response. So it was Jahanara, Nusrat thought. The maid looked worried. Nusrat shouted from his window. 'Knock louder!' The maid glanced up in surprise, then turned to the door and knocked harder, there was still no response.

'Break the door down!' Nusrat shouted, as he jumped out of bed, ran down the stairs and raced into the adjacent house. He was yelling as he entered, and people began to follow him not knowing what was happening. Nusrat rushed around trying to locate the bathhouse. Finally he found it. He pointed to the hammam. 'Open that door,' he shouted. 'Open that door.' Amanullah Khan, his wife and his elder son stood by, confused by his shouts and the screams of the maid in the courtyard. 'Open that door,' yelled Nusrat again and, with his shoulder, began butting the door.

It was only then that Jahanara's father and elder brother swung into action and started pounding the door too. There was still no response. Other members of the clan began hurriedly arriving. Two more men joined in and the five men battered the door till it finally gave way and flew open. Inside the dark interior, lying on the floor, was Jahanara. She was still breathing and had managed to change into her clothes before she fainted. Nusrat looked at her as she lay there with one arm stretched forward as if to reach for the door. Amanullah Khan hurriedly lifted his daughter up, carried her to the porch outside and laid her down on a bed. Nusrat watched as Jahanara began to cough and moan and started to regain consciousness. Soon the women of the clan

surrounded her.

She will be all right, thought Nusrat, as he went back to inspect the bathhouse. As he entered, he felt a constriction in his chest and smelled a faint, sickly-sweet odour. Glancing up to where the hammam funnel met the chimney chute, he saw that the chute had been blocked by a piece of cloth. Jahanara, from the time she began her bath, had been slowly inhaling carbon monoxide. By the time she had finished and changed into her clothes she had probably felt dizzy and fainted. Another fifteen minutes or so could have been fatal. Nusrat emerged from the bathhouse to see Jahanara sitting up on the bed and coughing violently with tears streaming down her face. The women were thumping her on the back while the men stood around watching anxiously. Finally she stopped heaving and slowly calmed down. She took about half a dozen deep breaths and shut her eyes as everyone continued to watch her anxiously. Then she opened her eyes, looked around and smiled. The entire clan, along with the retainers, smiled too in relief. Jahanara noticed Nusrat Beg.

'Were you the one who was shouting?' she asked.

Nusrat nodded. Jahanara smiled.

'I think I could hear you.'

'I know all of Quetta could,' Nusrat replied.

Jahanara laughed, stopped and then laughed again. Nusrat was glad to see he had impressed her.

Jahanara looked at him for a moment longer before turning to her father. 'Don't look so worried, Babajaan,' she said, 'I am all right.' Amanullah Khan, who had been standing by helplessly all along, walked up to his daughter and hugged her. 'Ya Allah,' he whispered. and then he began to cry. The other clan members watched silently. 'Ya Allah, Ya Allah. Ya Allah,' he kept murmuring as the tears flowed. 'I'm all right, Babajaan. I'm all right,' Jahanara whispered as she patted him on his back. 'Stop crying, please stop crying.'

Ammi, at this point in the story, a thought would always

cross my mind and it would make me smile. What would have happened if Jahanara had not managed to change her clothes in the bathhouse? She would have been lying naked in front of everybody! Father, mother, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, cousins, retainers! And, most importantly, in front of Nusrat Beg! For a young girl to be found in such a situation in the year 1932 would be quite something, wouldn't it?

Now on with the story.

It was later the same day, as Nusrat and Jamal Khan sat in the sun on the terrace, that things began to happen. It was Rukhsana who brought the news.

'You have been invited for dinner at Khan Baba's house,' she said excitedly.

'And why are you smiling, Apa?'

'I smell something in the wind. There is definitely something in the wind.'

'My young scholar,' said Jamal Khan. 'I think you are about to be given another chance by the "grand jury" to make your case for marriage to my niece. You are going to enter the hallowed and secret chambers of the household. Be prepared for the Khan inquisition and for God's sake, don't mess it up!'

Nusrat nodded.

He spent the next hour alone in his room wondering about all that was happening. Was he really prepared for marriage? Why hadn't Jamal Khan and his sister given him more time to think it over? Who was this girl? Then an image flashed through his mind: the image of a seventeen-year-old girl comforting her father as he sobbed on her shoulder. That was it, thought Nusrat Beg. That was it! At sundown, he changed into a fresh shirt, a long-sleeved woolen sweater, woolen trousers and laced shoes. He was dressed for the occasion.

As he entered the courtyard of the matriarch's house, he was formally received by all the men in the family, including his brother-in-law Jamal Khan. They were all dressed in the

traditional flowing shalwar kameez and woolen shawls. The women and children stood a little away and observed him. Attaullah Khan, the eldest son of the matriarch, cleared his throat and raised his hand. Everyone looked at him as he turned to Nusrat.

'Nusrat Beg,' he said formally in Pashto, 'we welcome you to our home. We have broken the code of the veil for you because of what you have done for our daughter. We thank you.'

'I am honoured to be accepted in your household,' said Nusrat.

Then there were solemn hugs from each of the men, and with each hug a murmur of welcome and a hand that went to the heart. The women smiled and greeted him too, from a distance. The children stood around looking at him curiously. Jahanara walked up to him and looking him straight in the eye, said quietly.

'Thank you for what you did.'

Nusrat smiled and nodded. She smiled too and walked away. Everyone then entered the large hall where the dastarkhwan was laid out over warm Bukhara rugs. The four hurricane lanterns placed on the floor to light up the room cast strange shadows on the walls as people passed by. The men washed their hands with warm water from a large kettle that flowed into a bowl held below. They settled down on the dastarkhwan to eat. So did the children. Nusrat found it difficult to sit on the floor because of the trousers he was wearing, but he managed somehow. He noticed Jahanara looking at him. He smiled, embarrassed. She smiled too.

'Do you like wearing these clothes?'

Nusrat was a bit surprised by the question but when he looked at her he had the feeling she genuinely wanted to know. And since the question had been asked, all eyes in the hall were trained on him waiting for an answer. Nusrat looked around the dastarkhwan and then back at Jahanara.

'Yes,' he replied.

'Do you wear them all the time?'

'Yes.'

'Even while sleeping?' asked Ghazala, the eight year-old.

There was a ripple of laughter all around. Nusrat Beg shook

his head.

'No, I wear a kurta-pyjama at night.'

Everyone nodded and the meal began. Nusrat was struck by the silence during dinner. Except for the sounds of spoons touching the metal degchis and the occasional murmur of the children, there was silence. But the meal was exquisite. There was a lamb curry with potatoes, seekh kababs, a dal, huge pieces of roasted chicken, and a salad of tomatoes, onions and carrots. There were naans and rotis too. Nusrat looked at the women and three young girls who were in the kitchen replenishing the food in the bowls and making fresh naans and rotis. The girls were the ones who brought the food to the dastarkhwan and, among them, Jahanara was the one supervising the other two. When the meal was over, the men and children washed their hands and the girls removed the food and plates from the dastarkhwan. Then the men, along with the matriarch, settled down once again. Nusrat wondered what was to follow. He looked at Jamal Khan and then glanced toward his sister who was with the other women of the house. She smiled at him. Nusrat smiled back and looked away. It was then that he saw Jahanara's father raise his hand. Everyone turned to look at him.

'Nusrat Beg,' said Amanullah Khan, 'two nights ago my younger brother asked for my daughter's hand in marriage on your behalf. I had said no.'

Amanullah Khan paused, looked around the room and then addressed Nusrat again.

'But today, I have decided to rethink my decision. Before I do so, however, I would like my entire family to listen to what you have to say. We all would like to know more about your family and its history. I know we have your sister in our midst, but we never thought to ask her this because our brother had already made up his mind. With you, it is different. We would also like to know what you plan to do and how you will be able to support a family. We ask you all this because it has to do with the future of my daughter.'

Nusrat was taken aback. Even though he had had an inkling of what could happen at dinner, he had not imagined it would turn

out this way. Here was the entire extended Khan family—men, women, boys and girls and smaller children—all waiting for his reply. It was like an open court with everyone invited. He turned to look at Jahanara. She was leaning against a doorway that led to an inner room and she was looking directly at him with a steady gaze, almost as if to tell him she was the one who really wanted to hear him out. He turned to look at the women who sat near the kitchen. They were all staring at him. He shifted his gaze to his sister. She nodded and smiled encouragingly. Nusrat took a deep breath and began to speak 'Khan Baba, your clan has an illustrious history and can trace its roots all the way back to the time of Shah Babar. I know it has a record of that. I also know that your clan believes that a man's worth can be judged by his family, his tribe and his roots. I respect that. But I belong to a family that has lost its history. I have no roots like you do. All I know is that the story of my family begins with Wali Beg. That is what my father told me. Mirza Wali Beg was from Samarqand and he, with a band of warriors, moved from Samarqand to Kabul seeking glory. It was an age for adventurers. And it was in Kabul that he joined the grand alliance of Ahmed Shah Durrani that was marching on to fight the new rulers of Delhi, the Marathas. Though the war was eventually won, Wali Beg's band was decimated in the first two hours of battle because it was at the helm of a cavalry charge. The charge was a fiasco. After the truce Wali Beg did not return home. Maybe he felt that he would not have the courage to face the mothers or widows of the men who had died in the field. He stayed on in the land of Hind where he was given a small jagir near a town called Najibabad, just north of the city of Delhi. That was seven generations ago. It was here that Wali Beg met other rootless Mughals, Turkmen, Pathans, Afghans and Persians, all of them casualties of an era of endless wars. He married the daughter of one such casualty. After the death of Wali Beg, the links with his history and his roots got weaker and were slowly erased, so that by the time of my grandfather, Mirza Akbar Beg, they were entirely lost.'

Nusrat stopped speaking. There was silence around the

dastarkhwan.

'What happened to the land?' asked the matriarch.

'We had it for four generations until it was seized by the British after the bloody uprising of 1857. After the loss of the land my grandfather, Akbar Beg, decided to teach. He was a scholar of Arabic and Persian texts. He began to teach in the courts of Lahore and Rampur. His son, Safdar Beg, followed in his footsteps. Only, he added English texts to the Persian, Urdu and Arabic ones. He was a travelling scholar who tutored the families of the rich and the powerful across the Punjab, in Delhi and in Avadh. It was in Quetta that he met Jamal Khan. So all I can say is that for three generations, we have been scholars. Our family has already been small. We have no links with larger clans and the tribes and therefore we can claim no history.'

There was silence in the room once again.

'Since you have no land and no inheritance, how will you support my daughter?' asked Amanullah Khan.

'I have a job as a teacher in the government school at Sibi,' said Nusrat.

'Will that be enough?' asked the matriarch.

'It's a start,' said Nusrat. 'As for the future, I have faith in myself.'

'What makes you so confident about your future?' asked Amanullah Khan.

'Because I have gambled on it,' said Nusrat confidently.

There was a murmur in the hall. Nusrat knew it had to with his choice of the word 'gamble'. He looked at Jahanara. She didn't look away. Her gaze held steady.

It was the elder brother, Attaullah Khan, who asked the next question.

'What do you mean, "gambled on it"?'

'The world is changing rapidly?' said Nusrat. 'And I am on the side of change. There have been revolutions in France and Russia. Mighty storms have swept away old histories and values. Kings and queens do not matter any more because all men are equal. And I believe that from now on, men will be judged not by who they

are, what their families own or where they come from, but by what they can do. Look at the decrees of Kemal Atatürk! In one stroke, he has changed the destiny of his people and his country. Look at what electricity, the telephone and the motor car have done to the world! There are even airplanes in the sky! Every day something is being discovered. That is the world I have gambled on. That is the world I believe will shape the future. We have a choice. Do we want to live in a well from which we can see only a patch of sky, or do we want to live outside the well and see much more? I want to live outside the well. That is the way I want to see the world.'

Nusrat paused and looked around the room. All eyes were on him. Jahanara was still looking at him steadily. Attaullah Khan broke the silence.

'You talked abut Russia. It is said they don't believe in God there. You talked about that Turk. He has forbidden women from wearing the veil. He has persecuted priests. What have you to say about that?'

'About Russia, I do not agree with all that they have done, but I do believe that they are on the side of the poor. For the first time in the history of mankind, the poor have a voice.'

'Do you believe in Allah, Nusrat Beg?'

'I do. I most certainly do.'

'Then why do you take up for that Turk?'

'Because he believes in Allah too,' said Nusrat. 'But he was tired of seeing foolish priests harm the progress of his country.'

'How can Islam harm progress?'

'Not Islam, but some of its interpreters can. Look how far back we have fallen from the achievements of Ibn Senna and Ibn Rushd.'

'Who are they?' asked Attaullah Khan.

'They were great scholars of Islam.'

'Like al-Ghazali?'

Nusrat was surprised. He hadn't imagined that Attaullah Khan would have heard of the scholar and would ask such a question.

'No,' he said. 'Al-Ghazali was an eminent religious scholar, among the best that Islam has produced. But Ibn Senna and Ibn

Rushd went beyond him to include the study of science, mathematics and philosophy.'

Nusrat stopped speaking. Everyone in the large, strangely lit room was silent. Nusrat hoped he had set them thinking. He looked at Jahanara. She was looking at him, and then she turned her gaze away. It was the matriarch who now intervened.

'What about Jahanara?' she asked. 'You may think what you will and Allah will be the judge of that. But how will you be able to take care of her and the children that, God willing, she will have? If you find yourself in trouble, would you come to us for help?'

'No,' said Nusrat, 'that I promise you. As I said I am going to create my future. That is what I believe in and that is what I shall practise.'

The matriarch stared at him with eyes that shone like burning pieces of coal. Nusrat could almost feel the heat of her gaze. It was the eldest son who finally broke the silence.

'We are not here to judge you, Nusrat Beg. If that is how you see the world, so be it. Ours is a world of tradition, of values that have come down to us from Islam and our ancestors. You think differently and we respect that. We will let you know of our decision shortly.'

Attaullah Khan got up. So did everyone else. The inquisition was over. On the way out Nusrat tried to get a glimpse of Jahanara but she was not to be seen.

'Did I speak too much?' the question was posed to his sister and Jamal Khan later that night. They both shrugged but his sister seemed a bit exasperated.

'Did you have to mention Atatürk?' she asked.

'What's wrong with that?'

'I think you frightened them. And all that talk about science and philosophy and revolutions! What will they think about that?'

Jamal Khan laughed.

'Let is be, Rukhsana. He said what he wanted to say.'

'I'm not against that, but this brother of mine has to learn to

keep his mouth shut sometimes.'

In the days that followed the clan held several late-night meetings, with just the men, Jahanara's mother and the matriarch participating. Nusrat tried to pry information out of Jamal Khan but he didn't succeed.

'The arguments are still being heard,' Jamal said wryly. 'I am under oath and therefore not allowed to tell you anything about what is going on. What I can tell you, though, is that my mother will be the toughest one to convince.'

It was during these days of waiting that Nusrat got a closer look at the world of the Pathans. He was allowed access into the courtyards of their homes, to meet up with the men, the boys and the children. And, from a distance, he was allowed access to the women and the girls. There was no access to Jahanara, however. She was not to be seen. It was from these encounters that he gathered that the family had come to Quetta from Kandahar in Afghanistan about four generations ago. They owned vast tracks of fertile agricultural land to the north-east of Quetta, they had huge herds of cattle and livestock, they owned workshops and hardware stores and stores for civil supplies, and could, through marriage and blood lines, lay claim to a biradari of several powerful Pathan tribes in Afghanistan and the North-West Frontiers. The clan could, in times of need, draw on these enormous reserves. It was a very rich clan. The only outsider, really, was his sister.

'The pauper has asked for the hand of the princess,' thought Nusrat.

But he also came to realize that this was not the classic feudal, landholding family that he had read about. The men worked hard. They tended their fields and their herds alongside the hired labour. They were in their workshops and stores from early in the morning right through the day. Even in the winters. They returned home only late in the evening. Nusrat also noticed that

men never really talked to their wives. The only conversations that occurred were an occasional 'yes' or 'no', and sometimes a nod. Not that they were rude, they were just monosyllabic. With their sons, they were harsh. A mistake made by a boy, if not quickly admitted to, could lead to a terrible thrashing. If a boy hurt himself he was not mollycoddled, nor were the women allowed to comfort him. He got the necessary medical attention and that was that. It seemed that these were the rites of passage into manhood. And yet, these same men could be strangely gentle with their daughters. A girl escaping the fury of an angry mother or aunt could always find refuge in the arms of a father or an uncle. It made Nusrat smile because it was these very men who had initially opposed Jamal Khan's attempt at educating the girls. They had relented only when the teachers, two Pashto-speaking women from the garrison school, agreed to come to the house. The teachers charged an enormous fee for doing so.

As for the women of the household, they were surprisingly liberated. Besides the cooking and washing, sewing and cleaning, they also repaired broken pieces of furniture. There was a common workshop in the fortress and Nusrat actually saw Attaullah Khan's wife, Mahbano, welding together the base of a broken sewing machine. He watched in amazement as Asmat, Jahanara's fifteen year-old sister, went up a ladder to the roof to fix a burst drainpipe. Of course, she almost fell off the ladder when she spotted him staring at her! Nusrat also noticed that the women laughed and chatted with each other much more than the men did. It was they who laid down the laws of the house, which everyone was expected to follow. They fixed the time to eat and bathe, and the time for the children to play. They decided what to cook and what had to be bought for the homes. What was more, they also decided which guests to invite to the house and who to keep out. But all this occurred within the boundaries of the house. They rarely stepped out. When they did, they were escorted and veiled. Outside the fortress, the veils would be removed only when the women entered the homes of their parents, brothers, sisters, aunts or uncles.

On the morning of the eighth day after Nusrat's arrival and one day before he left for Sibi, everyone was asked to gather at the house of Amanullah Khan. 'It's strange,' muttered Jamal Khan as he and Nusrat walked to his brother's house, 'but I think this is it. A decision has been taken and I am completely unaware of what it is.'

Nusrat Beg realized that for the first time in his life, he was nervous.

The meeting was held in the large living room where the dastarkhwan was laid out. Nusrat greeted the brothers as he settled down. They wished him in turn, their faces impassive. He smiled at the matriarch, who nodded curtly. Standing behind Amanullah Khan was his wife Fauziabano. Nusrat greeted her too. As soon as everyone had settled down. Amanullah Khan cleared his throat and began to speak.

'Nusrat Beg,' he said. 'I have called you here to tell you of my decision.'

He paused. Nusrat noted that he had used the word 'my' rather than 'our'. Amanullah Khan looked around the room at his brothers and then turned to look at his mother. She was watching him closely. Amanullah Khan turned back to Nusrat.

'Your proposal has put all of us in a deep turmoil. If you had asked for anything else we would have gladly given it because of what you did. But now you have asked for something that is closest to my heart, closest to our hearts. My family had quite a few meetings and we could not come to a conclusion. There were some who agreed to the proposal. There were some against it. As God is my witness, I could not sleep because of the great storm within me.'

He paused again. Nusrat knew that the man was struggling to find the words to express what was on his mind. Amanullah Khan now turned to address the members of his family.

'Fauziabano and I prayed to Allah to give us an answer, to guide us. We prayed night and day. But there was no sign. We

didn't know what to do. It was then that Fauziabano suggested that we ask our daughter for her opinion. Now, I know it is not for daughters to decide, but all of you know Jahanara. You know how mature she is. Is she not?'

Amanullah looked at his brothers. They nodded silently in agreement. He looked at his mother. He nodded slightly too, but it seemed she wanted her son to proceed.

'So last night we talked to her and we told her what each of you thought. We asked her to think it over carefully before deciding. This morning she gave me her answer.'

'What was her answer?' asked the matriarch.

'She said she would like to be married to Nusrat Beg.'

The matriarch shut her eyes and a silence descended on the room. It was a moment Nursat would never forget. It was as if all sound had been sucked out of the room and silence like a mist had settled in. Nusrat didn't know how long it lasted, but it was broken when the eldest brother decided to speak.

'Brother,' he said, 'what is your decision?'

Amanullah Khan paused for a moment.

'Fauziabano and I have accepted it.'

'And is that final?'

Amanullah Khan nodded. Nusrat looked round the room not knowing how to react.

'So be it,' Attaullah Khan. 'We all accept. But remember, brother, our acceptance of this proposal does not mean that we approve. We only accept. Do you have anything to say, Nusrat Beg?'

'I thank you all,' said Nusrat. 'I shall try my best to be worthy of the honour.'

There was silence once again. Nusrat glanced at the matriarch. She was looking directly at him.

'We will ask Jahanara to forfeit all her inheritance rights to our land and property,' she said, 'Manzoor?'

There was an audible sigh in the room. Amanullah Khan looked sharply at his mother and then turned to look at Nusrat.

'Manzoor,' said Nusrat. 'I accept.'

Amanullah Khan shook his head.

'It is a heavy price for my daughter to pay, Amma.'

'Nursrat Beg has told us about the world he believes in,' said the matriarch. 'Let him match those words with deeds'.

'I accept,' said Nusrat.

The matriarch got up and left.

There was no further talk as the men finished drinking their tea. Silently they got up. So did Nusrat. And then, one by one, they hugged Nusrat Beg and left. Only Amanullah Khan, his wife Fauzia and Jamal Khan were left in the room. Amanullah turned to Nusrat.

'I have deeply disturbed the tranquility of my family.'

'I know,' said Nusrat.

'I have also given pain to people whom I love very much.'

'I know.'

'This marriage will also not be accepted by many people of our clan and tribe. They will feel offended, but I believe I have done the right thing by my daughter. My family and that of my brother Jamal Khan will make the arrangements for the wedding. It will take place two months from now. In the meanwhile, settle down to your job as a teacher. Go, and God be with you.'

Nusrat left the room and walked out into the courtyard. He had almost reached the huge gate on the outer wall when he felt impelled to turn around. He did so and his eyes travelled up to the rooms on the upper floor of Amanullah Khan's home. Standing there at a window was Jahanara. She looked at him for a while, then turned and walked away. Two days later Nusrat Beg would leave for Sibi. He was going to be a teacher. In two months' time he would return and marry Jahanara.

What a beginning to a love story, Ammi! Such dreams and tensions, and also a bit of destiny thrown in! What would have happened if Jahanara hadn't fainted in the bathhouse? What if

Nusrat Beg had not been present when she did? What if Nusrat Beg hadn't been given a second chance? And, most importantly, what if Amanullah Khan hadn't asked his daughter for her opinion? Imagine a feudal family doing that in those days! It was unheard of, incredible! What did Jahanara say to her parents that convinced them that her opinion was the only one that mattered. Finally, in addition to all this was the harsh condition laid down by the matriarch that made sure all the inheritance rights of the bride would be forfeited.

Nusrat Beg and Jahanara got married in the first week of February in the year 1933. It was not the lavish affair the Khans were used to. Just abut a hundred close relatives accepted the invitation to attend. The rest kept away, to show their displeasure. As 'meher' or financial pledge in case things went wrong and the two of them separated, Nusrat staked all his. Everything that he possessed in terms of money and property would go to his wife.

And so, Nusrat Beg and his bride Jahanara set off for Sibi to start a new life. It would be here that their journey of love would begin.

the ham sandwich

I am eight years old and I hate the snacks Ammi prepares for me for the midday break at school, aloo parathas, or keema parathas, or gudh ki roti, which she puts in a little aluminium tiffin box, along with homemade sherbet in a bottle. In fact I am ashamed as I see the other children eating sandwiches and fruit and cutlets, and drinking colas. And they have imported chocolates and cheese too.

'Can't I have something else?' I ask her.

'What's wrong with this?'

I don't have an answer but I still make a face.

'Arre Saddu, itne pyaar se banaya,' she says. Then she translates the sentence into English. 'How much love I put into it!'

She says it so dramatically that I laugh. She laughs too.

'See, I know how much English?'

I carry the tiffin box to school. But I am still ashamed.

At the midday break I open the little aluminium box. As I do so Tehemton Anklesaria, my classmate, walks up to me. He checks the contents of the box.

'Want to exchange?' he asks.

'What?'

'My ham sandwich for your keema paratha.'

'Okay,' I say immediately.

We exchange. And we eat. Tehemton eats my paratha quickly, then watches me as I finish the sandwich. When I am done, he gets up and screams with delight.

'You've sinned! You've sinned! You've eaten pork,' he shouts.

'I have not,' I protest.

'You have. Ham is pork!'

'It's not!'

'It is!'

'It's not!'

'It is!'

I look at the other children who have crowded around. They nod in agreement. I look at them once more. They keep nodding.

'Ham is pork,' says one.

I get up and punch Tehemton and we have a fight. But I know I have sinned. I am in extreme agony but I do not tell my brother and my sister about it as we walk back home after school. It is the longest walk I have ever had, as I imagine myself in hell. I remember all those graphic stories that Ammi has told me about jahannum. About the terrifying fire and fury that awaits all sinners, and how they scream in pain as they are roasted and toasted for all eternity. Will I be forgiven? I plan my defence in front of Ammi. I will tell her that I didn't know ham was pork and therefore, was that really a sin?

The three of us reach home and I am surprised to find Baba at home reading a book. He normally gets home a little later but there he is. We greet him as we enter and I quietly go in search of Ammi. She is not at home.

I walk around the house nervously. Baba notices it and calls me over.

'What's happened?' he asks.

'Nothing,' I reply.

He looks at me closely and then continues his reading. I walk to my room where I meet up with my brother who is changing his clothes. I want his advice but then I think the better of it and decide to wait for Ammi. Baba walks into the room and looks at me.

'Something has happened, hasn't it?'

'No, nothing has.'

My brother looks at me too.

'Something has,' says Baba. 'Tell me about it.'

Just then Ammi enters the room. I see her. She smiles at me.

'What's happening?' she asks.

Baba answers her without taking his eyes off me.

'Saddu wants to tell us something, don't you?'

I look at him and then at Ammi.

Just then my sister enters the room too and, sensing the situation, decides to stay to find out what's what. Now my whole family is in the room and I don't like it.

'What is it, Saddu?' asks Ammi.

I decide to go for it.

'I ate pork and I have sinned,' I say quickly.

The family stares at me.

'But I didn't know it was pork, Tehemton said it was ham,' I add.

My father looks at me and smiles. I look at him, surprised.

'Will I go to hell?'

'Yes,' says my sister.

She is thumped on the shoulder by Ammi.

'He didn't know it was pork,' says my brother.

I like his taking up for me but I am waiting for my father's answer. He smiles.

'No, it was a mistake, and you won't go to hell.'

I feel relieved. Ammi, standing behind my father, nods too.

'Allah Mian will understand.'

I am feeling much better now.

'How did it taste?' asks Baba.

I try to think of an answer that will please him.

'I didn't like it.'

Baba looks at me closely. I feel insecure.

'Did you eat all of it!'

I am trapped. I don't know what to say. I nod slowly. Ammi laughs.

'So you liked it,' says Baba.

I hesitate and then nod.

Ammi smiles and so does my brother.

'There is really no harm in eating it,' says Baba.

I am shocked. So is the rest of the family. Baba gets up and

leaves, and Ammi explodes.

'No, he will not! Not in my house!'

Baba stops at the door.

'I didn't say we should cook it in our house.'

Baba leaves the room. Everyone else looks at each other.

'I don't know what he meant by that,' says Ammi finally. 'But you will not eat any more pork. Is that clear?'

I nod and she leaves the room too. My sister looks at me.

'You've sinned,' she says,

It doesn't bother me. I've been cleared by Baba and Ammi.

That evening, at the dinner table, Baba clarifies his position on pork. The three of us listen to him carefully. So does Ammi. He tells us about the disease that people got by eating pork in the past and that was why some religions banned it. But since those early days, a lot of things have changed. Pigs are now carefully fed and taken care of, and checked for disease. As we listen, my brother and I know it is time to start the revolution.

'So eating pork now is not a sin, is it?' asks Aziz.

Ammi looks at Baba who is eating his dinner and pretending not to have heard.

'And what happens to people who ate pork when it was a sin?' I add.

There is no reply from the head of the table.

'What about the Christians, who have always eaten pork?' I ask.

'And the Chinese too,' says my brother.

'Even the Parsis,' I add.

'Are they sinners or are they not?' asks my sister who is genuinely confused and part of the revolt.

Ammi looks at us, and then at Baba.

'Look what you've done,' she says.

Baba doesn't answer. We eat in silence but we are still waiting for an answer. And Ammi knows that she had to be the one to give it. She eats quietly but I know she is thinking. We wait. She

finally speaks.

'A sinner is someone who sins against people. Not because he eats pork or doesn't eat pork,' she says.

Then she adds.

'But in my house there will be no pork!'

The story of the ham sandwich doesn't quite end here. It took an interesting turn a little later that night, for a I hadn't taken Talat and her formidable point of view into account. She was not convinced by Baba's explanation about the history of pigs and their upbringing.

'They were just being good to you, you have sinned,' she whispered to me after dinner. 'You are going to hell.'

Talat had always been relentless and even though I had both Baba and you on my side, I didn't want to take any chances, Ammi. That is why I came to your bed that night and began to massage your feet. Do you remember? 'That's very nice of you Saddu . . . very nice,' you had said, as I kneaded your feet and ankles. I know you were surprised by my action but what I didn't tell you was that I was hedging my bets. You had once told me that it was written in the Quran that heaven lay at the feet of all mothers. As I massaged your feet furiously, I was hoping God was watching and taking down notes.

laying the foundation of love

It was on the train to Sibi that Nusrat Beg began to reflect on all that had happened. Sitting next to him in the first-class coach was the young woman who had accepted him as her husband. Not just that, she had taken a decision that went against the wishes of so many people and she had broken the strict laws of her clan. Jamal Khan had done it earlier but then he was a man and a judge of repute. Why had she done it, Nusrat wondered. Why him from among so many others? He felt it had to do with something he had said at dinner that night. He remembered her standing against that pillar listening to him intently. But what was it that he had said? He also wondered about her parents. Why did they do it? He then recalled her father crying on her shoulder as she comforted him. It was so apparent that he loved her very much. Was that it? Maybe it was. It took a lot to accept the decision of a daughter and overrule everyone else.

Nusrat looked at his young bride sitting beside him, covered in a burqa. He glanced around the coach at the other passengers. There were about ten of them. He turned his attention back to Jahanara. All that he could see were her hands. He looked at them closely. Her fingers were long and slender. 'Beautiful,' he thought. 'I hope our children have hands like hers.' He tried to get a look at her feet but because of the way she sat and the length of her burqa, he couldn't. He cleared his throat.

'Do you know that from now on you will be called Jahanara Begum?'

Jahanara nodded.

'Imagine, one day you are Jahanara and the next day, Jahanara Begum. Do you know what Jahanara means?'

There was another nod.

‘Good. So, my Queen of the World, do you like wearing the burqa?’

There was a little laugh and then a nod.

‘Can you see clearly?’

The nod again.

‘Wonderful. Imagine if the Queen of the World couldn’t see too clearly.’

There was the little laugh again. Nusrat continued.

‘I wonder how I would look in a burqa.’

This time the laugh was louder. Then Jahanara quickly turned around to see whether the other passengers had heard her. And she continued to look out of the window.

‘Have you travelled on this train before?’

There was a shake of the head.

‘It’s quite an achievement. It runs from Chaman on the border of Afghanistan through mountains and valleys and across the desert, all the way to Karachi. A fantastic engineering feat! Don’t you think so?’

There was a nod.

‘Soon we will be going through the Bolan Pass. It is through this pass that so many mighty armies have marched. Some say that even the forces of Alexander passed through here.’

There was the nod again. Nusrat decided to slip in ‘The Question’.

‘Why did you tell your father that you wanted to marry me?’

There was no reply.

‘I would really like to know.’

There was still no answer. Nusrat decided to change the subject.

‘You know, I think the children in my school really like me. And I too am enjoying myself. They are a rough lot but I think they are learning.’

He glanced at her.

‘Do you think I’ll make a good schoolteacher?’

There was a pause and then a nod.

‘Why?’

There was no answer.

'Do you find it embarrassing to talk to me in a train?'

There was the nod again.

'Should I stop talking?'

Now there was the shake of the head.

'Will you talk to me when we are alone?'

There was the nod.

'Alhamdulillah, I shall wait for that moment! In the meanwhile can I impress you with my knowledge of English?'

There was the nod again.

For the next hour and a half Nusrat recited poetry to his wife. He recited passages from Browning, Shelley, Keats and Byron. He kept at it right through the gorges of the Bolan Pass. And then he ran out of steam.

'Have I impressed you enough, Begum?'

There was the nod.

'May I now have your permission to sleep?'

Jahanara smiled inside her burqa as Nusrat leaned back against his seat and shut his eyes. He was quite a character, this Nusrat Beg. From the safety of her veil she had seen the expressions of her fellow passengers as they watched him recite poetry. They didn't know what to make of him. There were smiles, then sniggers and finally awe. How long would he keep at it? At one point, an elderly Pashtun man actually stood up to silence him but he was stopped by the young boy sitting next to him. It was probably his son. The older man then turned away and looked out of the window. When the recitation stopped, he glared at Nusrat Beg and shook his head. Was he really reciting poetry or was it gibberish, thought Jahanara. She would ask him one day. Her thoughts went back to her family. She wondered why her parents had left the decision to marry up to her, especially her father. She would have accepted his choice, whatever it was, because she really loved him. She wistfully recalled the several occasions he had taken her riding with him on his horse, when she

was a child. They would be out for hours surveying their lands that lay at the foothills of the Toba Kakkar range. How often she had shared a meal with him, sitting on his lap. Right up till the time she turned twelve, as soon as he returned from work, he would lift her up and whirl her around and then hug her. There wasn't a day he missed doing that and Jahanara loved it.

Her thoughts shifted back to Nusrat Beg. Had she made the right choice? She remembered what the matriarch had said. Why had she ignored it? Was it because of her uncle Jamal Khan? He was the one who had made the proposal and he would not have done so unless he was absolutely sure it was the right thing for her. She turned to look at Nusrat Beg who was sitting next to her with his eyes shut. He looked so vulnerable like this, so lonely. He had said so many things, spoken so passionately, but would he be able to live up to those words? Soon they would be in Sibi and Jahanara wondered what her life would be like with this man.

Sibi, at that time, was a small outpost, a casbah for the people who lived in the desert lands that lay to the south and west and the semi-arid lands to the northeast. It was set in a green alluvial plain surrounded by sand, scrub and rock. Its only claim to fame was that it was one of the hottest places in the world in summer, and in winters the temperatures could drop close to freezing point.

Nusrat and Jahanara, travelling in one tonga with another in tow to accommodate the rest of their luggage, reached the school which was situated on a little hillock that overlooked the town. The unusual thing about the hillock, as Nusrat Beg would laughingly recall later, was that it had forgotten to turn green. It therefore stood out as a rocky, barren bump on a flat alluvial plain. It was on this hillock that the British had recently built a boarding school for boys which, they believed, would civilize a people who were not used to being civilized. And it was here that Nusrat Beg would teach history, geography and English to tribal Baluch and Pashtun children.

As Nusrat and Jahanara got off the tonga to unload their luggage, a horde of about twenty-five scruffy and raucous young boys descended from the hillock and raced towards them, followed by a tall, elderly man and a short, stout woman.

'That's the principal, Dost Mohommed Khan, and his wife Shahgul, and these are my students,' whispered Nusrat to Jahanara.

The children, between the ages of six and fourteen, surrounded Nusrat and Jahanara as the elderly couple approached them.

'Salaam alaikum,' said Dost Mohommed Khan.

His wife moved forward and hugged Jahanara.

'Welcome to your new home.'

Dost Mohommed Khan turned to the children.

'Come on, let's show them our hospitality.'

The children stormed into the tongas. They scrambled into them and on top of them to collect the luggage. There were four large trunks, two huge leather suitcases, three holdalls and a new sewing machine. There was much huffing, puffing and heaving to get all of it up the hill. Finally, everyone reached the top. Waiting to greet them now was the other junior teacher for maths and science. Madanlal Khubchand, a lanky young man in glasses. 'Welcome, welcome,' he said and smiled. The whole entourage then moved towards the school. It was a low-slung building that had three large classrooms and a small office. Adjoining the school and in the same compound were the homes for the teachers. The first, and larger one, was for the principal, and the two smaller ones, for the junior teachers. Further away, a long, rectangular hall served as the dormitory for the forty children.

'This is it,' said Nusrat Beg.

They were standing in front of a three-room cottage with a broad front veranda. Dost Mohommed and his wife led them in, followed by Madanlal Khubchand and the scruffy children. The children noisily placed the luggage in a corner of the large living

room and then gathered around Jahanara. She was still in her burqa. Twenty-five curious and unwashed faces, some with dripping noses from perpetual colds, stared at her. Nusrat Beg, who was dressed in woolen trousers, a shirt and sweater, and laced shoes, made an announcement to his audience.

'Friends and young scholars,' he said, 'the lady who stands before you is my bride.'

There was a murmur of 'salaam alaikums' from the twenty-five unwashed faces that looked at her expectantly. Nusrat looked at Jahanara. She turned to look at Dost Mohommed Khan and Madanlal Khubchand. They quietly left the room. The children stared on. Jahanara slowly lifted her veil and there was an audible collective 'aaaahh' from the children.

'Wa alaikum as-salaam,' said Jahanara.

It was their first night together as husband and wife, their 'suhaag raat', and Nusrat Beg knew that Jahanara was nervous.

'All right Begum, from now on and forever more, we shall be friends, and all barriers and secrets will cease to exist. Is that all right with you?'

Jahanara smiled.

'Yes.'

'Now tell me about the veil. Will it hold for the principal?'

'I don't know. He's as old as my father.'

'What about Madanlal Khubchand?'

'It will. He's a young man.'

'That's a pity. I can't show you off to him?'

'Begum, I would like the world to know that I have a pretty wife.'

'Do you think I'm pretty?'

'I think so, but then some people say I have bad taste.'

Jahanara laughed. Nusrat Beg felt she had relaxed a little and he decided to ask 'The Question' again.

'Begum, I have asked you this before and I have not got an answer. Tell me, why did you tell your father that you wanted to

marry me?'

'Why do you want to know?'

'Because I know I'm not the handsomest man you have seen. In fact when I see myself in the mirror I see a very ordinary looking person. I'm a schoolteacher who earns a hundred and ten rupees a month, which is no incentive for a woman who comes from a very wealthy family. And, as far as my future is concerned, I don't know. I can only imagine it.'

'That's why.'

'Can I tell you a story?'

'I love stories, please go ahead, Begum.'

Jahanara smiled.

'I was about seven years old when the first sewing machine came into our house. For the first two days my mother and my aunts made a mess of the clothes. I used to laugh when they did so. They didn't know how to use it. It was so difficult to combine the use of the feet and the hands. Slowly they got to understand how it worked and what a difference it made! What took us a week to stitch earlier could be done in a day. I was amazed too and I wondered about this machine that could do so much work so quickly. One day, I opened it up to see how it worked. It was in the afternoon and there was no one around. I opened up the screws wherever I could find them and began to dismantle the machine. Suddenly I heard someone coming into the room, so I ran away. It was Dadi. She hadn't seen me, but she was so angry. She thought it was one of the boys and she lined them all up for a thrashing if the guilty one didn't own up. That's when my father arrived and I told him it was me.'

'Did you get a thrashing?'

'No. My father has never done that. But he asked me why I had done it, and I told him I wanted to know how the machine worked.'

'What did he say?'

'He just laughed. So when he asked me about you I reminded him of that story, and I told him that I did not want to live in a well and see only a bit of the sky.'

'Didn't I say that?'

'Yes you did, that night in my house. I also told him that even if seeing more of the sky would bring pain, it would still be better than living in a well.'

Nusrat Beg began to fall in love with Jahanara Begum.

They spent about two years and three months at Sibi. In the first week of their stay, Jahanara Begum scrubbed and washed the two large rooms. She dusted and cleaned the two cupboards, two beds, four chairs and dining table that were part of the furniture. She carefully arranged their clothes and linen. She scrubbed the kitchen and set up her cooking utensils, plates and cutlery. She swabbed the bathhouse, cleaned the hammam and removed the cobwebs on the ceiling. With the help of Shahgul, the principal's wife, and her sewing machine, she made eight bamboo chiks that served as curtains for the doors and windows. She covered the trunks she had brought from Quetta with cloth and made two makeshift tables. On top of each table she placed a Chinese vase. And then she laid down the three Bukhara rugs on the worn-out jute carpet. She did all this in the first week. Next Jahanara went to work on the little rocky patch of land at the back of the house. Protected from being seen from the school and without the burqa, she dug up the entire patch of land and removed all the stones. Then she lightly watered the patch. And she dug up the soil again.

'What are you up to, Begum?' asked Nusrat.

'I am making a garden,' she said.

'On this piece of land?'

Jahanara nodded.

'But Begum, it is hard and full of stones.'

'I know. Let us see what happens.'

Nusrat nodded but he was not hopeful. He asked the principal Dost Mohommed Khan if it was possible to grow anything on the hillock. The answer was a clear, unambiguous no. But Jahanara had not heard the answer and Nusrat did not have the heart to tell her. He brought her three cartloads of dried cattle-dung which she

spread over the patch and dug up the soil once more. Then she sent for plants and seeds from a nursery in Quetta. In the meanwhile she spread another two cartloads of dung, added more water and dug up the soil again. Her consignment of plants arrived by bus in six days' time. She planted the seeds and saplings and nursed that patch for a whole month. Nusrat watched. Nothing happened. And Jahanara started all over again. She dug up the land once more, added more dung and water and planted fresh seeds.

'That Begum of yours is very stubborn, Nusrat sahib,' said Madan Khubchand. 'She is trying again and again.'

'What! Have you been secretly looking at my wife, Madanlal sahib?'

'No, no . . . I was just . . .'

Nusrat Beg laughed.

'I was only joking. But yes, that wife of mine is stubborn.'

That was not all. In between cooking and caring for her garden, Jahanara occasionally attended Nusrat's classes. She would sit at the back of the class in a burqa and listen without saying a word. She loved it when he dramatized his history lessons and made the children play the roles of historical characters. They loved it too, especially when they enacted times of war. He had a tough time controlling them. He cajoled and coaxed the children to ask questions. Why are there wars? Why are there taxes? It was the same with their geography lessons. The children were made to actively participate and they would become countries, mountains, rivers and rainfall. Very often the noise and mayhem of Nusrat's class would reach Jahanara at home. The children were having a wonderful time. Yes, he was a good teacher, thought Jahanara.

Nusrat remembered the first time she entered his class. He was surprised and so was his class of twenty students. She came in a burqa, went to the back of the room and sat down. After five minutes she got up and quickly left. When he got back home that day he asked her why she had come and left so abruptly.

'I wanted to see you teach.'

'Then why did you leave?'

'The students were stinking. They haven't had a bath for years, it seems.'

Nusrat laughed.

'It's still cold and there's also a shortage of water around here.'

'That's no excuse,' she said.

'So?'

'They have to have a bath and wash their clothes.'

'Maybe they don't have a hammam in their dormitory.'

'That is still no excuse. They must know that coming to a classroom is something special.'

Jahanara then started a system of washing and bathing for the students. Every Sunday the hammam in their house was made ready. The children removed their clothes and, wrapped in blankets from their dormitory, they lined up for a bath, two at a time. With the help of Shahgul, all their clothes, including the sweaters and shawls, were washed and the heat of the hammam was used for drying. Nusrat could not believe it but it was happening before his eyes. The total time taken for Operation Cleanup was about four hours. And forty children emerged scrubbed and clean. Nusrat was impressed.

Jahanara had been in Sibi a little over a month when her father arrived on a visit. She was very happy to see him and also surprised. In Pathan tradition it was not for fathers to visit daughters after they got married, it was the other way round. Nusrat Beg too was surprised to see him arrive but greeted him warmly. What also surprised him was the huge amount of luggage that Amanullah Khan had brought with him which was being unloaded from a small truck. He had come with four large trunks and two holdalls loaded with gifts for the house. Jahanara watched the luggage being unloaded and glanced towards Nusrat Beg. There was a strange look on his face. It would be now that she would get to know something very important about the man she had married.

Jahanara was in the kitchen making tea when she heard Nusrat Beg enquire about the contents of the trunks. She paused to listen.

'I have brought some gifts for your home,' said Amanullah Khan.

'Is that part of Jahanara's inheritance?' asked Nusrat Beg.

There was a moment's silence.

'It is. And there's some money too.'

Jahanara walked into the room from the kitchen. She saw her husband think for a while, then he cleared his throat.

'Khan Baba, I am grateful for your generosity, but I cannot accept this.'

'May I ask why?'

'Because I have made a vow to your mother and it is a vow I must keep.'

Jahanara saw her father pause for a moment.

'Nusrat Beg,' said Amanullah Khan, 'let this be an exception. I will never try to break your vow again.'

'To accept once is enough, Khan Baba. After that it doesn't matter whether you accept again or not.'

Amanullah Khan thought for a while and then nodded.

'So be it. I shall take back what I have brought. I respect you, Nusrat Beg.'

'I respect you too, Khan Baba.'

Jahanara went back into the kitchen to make the tea. She realized then that Nusrat Beg, the man she had married, was a very proud man. Amanullah Khan stayed with them for two days and left. He would not visit them again.

The day her father left, Jahanara pulled out a piece of paper from the cupboard, read what she had written on it, and turned to Nusrat.

'Tell me about Ibn Senna and Ibn Rushd,' she said.

Nusrat was surprised.

'How have you heard of them?'

'You mentioned their names in Quetta.'

Nusrat Beg recalled what he had said that night to the members of the Pathan clan.

'You remember what I had said?'

'I had written down their names.'

'What do you want to know about them?'

'Tell me everything.'

'Begum, before I do so, I must warn you that I will have to talk about a lot of other things. I must tell you about an age that was amongst the finest in the history of man. And it was in those times that these two men lived and worked. Are you willing to listen?'

Jahanara nodded.

Nusrat Beg launched into his favourite subject.

'For five hundred years, Begum, from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, an age of learning, discovery and wisdom flourished. It stretched all the way from Bukhara in the East to Isfahan, Baghdad, Damascus, Alexandria, to Palermo in Italy and to Cordoba, Sevilla and Toledo in Spain in the West. There were hundreds of scholars, poets and mystics who contributed to this glorious age. They learnt from each other and improved upon what they had learnt, and extended the frontiers of knowledge about our world and the universe.'

Nusrat Beg talked about the great astronomer and mathematician al-Khwarizmi, the man who invented algebra, and about al-Farghani, al-Khujandi and Omar Khayyam and their contributions to the knowledge of the stars, the universe and the tilt of the earth's axis relative to the sun. He talked about how they had calculated the number of days in a year and the latitudes and longitudes of major cities. He told her abut the great physician al-Razi and his study of infectious diseases, his use of anaesthesia and his emphasis on hygiene. Such studies and cures had never been done before. He also told her about al-Razi's ten-volume writings on Greek, Indian and Chinese medicine and his monumental medical encyclopaedias. He spoke about al-Zahravi, the 'father of surgery' and designer of surgical instruments. He talked about the

scientists and mystic al-Farabi whose commentaries on Greek philosophy created a furore in theological circles. He talked about the philosopher and poet Ibn Araby whose works were sought to be banned because such sensuous poems on love and romance had never been written before and a lot of people were offended.

'Those were great times, Begum. And now I come to your question about the Ibn Senna and Ibn Rushd. I must start with Ibn Senna. He lived and worked about a thousand years ago. He was no less qualified than all the people I have mentioned. He was the author of many books on mathematics and science. His scholarship and writings on medicine went far beyond even the great al-Razi. His study of plants and herbs for their medicinal use, his study of the circulation of blood and the use of anaesthesia for surgery were far ahead of their times. His books on medicine were studied in Europe right up to the seventeenth century and he was called "The Master Physician". But his real contribution, as far as I am concerned, lay elsewhere.'

Nusrat paused.

'He was among the first freethinkers in the world.'

'What do you mean?'

'He started to question, Begum. He was among the first to say that faith is not the only way to the truth. It can be found in science and philosophy as well. Imagine, Begum! Truth in science and philosophy! He studied the works of Greek, Indian and Egyptian thinkers and other ancient mystics. Though these philosophers did not believe in God the way Muslims or Christians do, Ibn Senna felt there was so much to learn from them. He wrote about their work and added his own commentaries. Some Islamic scholars challenged his thinking. They were furious and wondered how he could have trust in a people who didn't have the Faith. They attacked his theories but he stood firm.'

'Was he a Muslim?'

'He was. He was very much a Muslim, Begum. And then, about a hundred years later, came Ibn Rushd, another wonderful thinker who lived in Spain. He studied the work of Ibn Senna and

added more to it, much more. “Falsafa”, or philosophy, was, to him, the highest form of truth. Faith was not good enough to understand God and the universe, it had to be backed by reason. These were two great men, Begum, two great men. Ibn Senna and Ibn Rushd: the Teacher and the Student. They are my favourites, Begum. They changed the way we think and they changed the world. There were many others who did the same later, but these two were among the first.’

Nusrat paused again for effect.

‘And therefore, I honour them. May their souls rest in peace, Ameen.’

Nusrat shut his eyes solemnly in prayer.

Two weeks later a miracle occurred. The plants and seedlings in the little path of ground behind Nusrat Beg’s house took root. Jahanara had got up early in the morning to water the ground when she noticed the little pods. She rushed back home and woke up Nusrat Beg. He couldn’t believe it.

‘You have done it, Begum. You have done it.’

Jahanara smiled. It was a Sunday and Nusrat Beg ran to call Dost Mohommed Khan, Shahgul and Madanlal Khubchand. They assembled and looked at the little pods that had emerged from the ground.

‘Bismillah,’ whispered Dost Mohommed Khan.

‘We must celebrate,’ said Nusrat Beg. ‘We shall all have dinner in my house tonight.’

‘I’ll make some kababs,’ said Shahgul.

Everyone smiled and looked at each other. It was then that Jahanara realized that she hadn’t worn her burqa, and that Madanlal Khubchand was staring at her. She was surprised and embarrassed. She turned and ran back into the house.

‘It’s all right, Begum,’ Nusrat said to her later. ‘Once the purdah is broken for a person, it should remain so. And he is a wonderful man. Do you know why he is here?’

Jahanara shook her head.

'He has come here to forget, Begum. He has come here to forget.'

Nusrat Beg told Jahanara Madanlal's story. He was studying in a college in Lahore when he met and fell in love with a Sikh girl. She loved him too but her parents objected because he was a Hindu. They pulled her out of college and married her off. Madanlal Khubchand graduated but couldn't bear to live in the same city after that, knowing she was there too. He took the teaching job in Sibi and had been there for a year.

'Did that girl really love him?' asked Jahanara.

Nusrat Beg nodded. Jahanara thought this over for a while

'Ask him to come to our house for a meal every Sunday,' she said.

'Every Sunday. Begum? Aren't you going slightly overboard?'

'He needs to be with people.'

'I will treat him like my brother.'

Nusrat Beg looked at his wife in wonder. He was amazed that she had taken a decision so rapidly about a young man she hardly knew. For the next two years, Madanlal Khubchand spent Sunday evenings with Nusrat Beg and Jahanara Begum.

Soon it was summer and things began to change dramatically in the school. By the middle of May there were just twenty students. Nusrat didn't know what to make of it. He asked the principal Dost Mohommed Khan for the reason. He was told that from now on, all through the summer, it would be like this. The children were required to work at home and in the fields. Some might return for a while, but one couldn't be sure.

'How will they complete their course?' he asked.

'They won't.'

'I don't understand!'

'Look Nusrat, most of these children will spend just three or four years in this school anyway. For their parents, that is enough of learning. One has to do one's best, that's all I can say.'

Nusrat carried on with his classes. But Jahanara knew he was

deeply distressed.

'I want to teach them so much. How can they learn anything this way?'

In temperatures that were now touching forty-five degrees centigrade, he travelled to outlying villages, to the homes of the children, and pleaded with their parents to send them to school regularly. Sometimes it worked but most often it did not. It seemed this was the law of the land. The parents had a choice: they could either let their children go to school or send them off to tend their fields and herds. In such a barren land, the fields had to be coaxed and forced to deliver and the hungry herds driven for miles before they could graze. It wasn't really a choice. The herds and fields always won.

Jahanara watched as Nusrat Beg sank into depression. She watched him walk to school every morning listlessly and return home silently. The heat of the summer wasn't helping either. It was the middle of June now and the temperature had already reached fifty degrees centigrade. Jahanara knew it would get only worse. One evening, she decided to act.

'For how long are you going to behave like the sky has fallen on your head?'

Nusrat couldn't believe that she could have an outburst like this and he began to laugh.

'Begum, what am I supposed to do with an almost empty classroom?'

'It will be full in winter.'

'So, do I wait till then?'

'No. You teach the students who are there.'

'I'm doing that Begum, but it isn't the same. Don't the parents realize that their children have to be educated? That's the only way they can change their lives. I came here hoping I could be of some help. I know I will not be here for too long, but while I am here, I want to excite them about the world.'

'You are doing that.'

'It's not enough. Begum. They have to be regular. I can only teach them if I feel I am making a difference to their lives. I can't go on like this.'

'Do you want to leave your job?'

'Right now I can't afford it.'

'All right, if you want a regular student, teach me.'

'What?'

'Teach me,' said Jahanara Begum.

It was incredible. That one statement of Jahanara lifted Nusrat Beg's gloom. For the next two years, they read books together, they talked and discussed things together, they laughed and got to know each other. As it is said in the West, they bonded.

Unfortunately, I have just a few details of this time in their lives, but what I do have will give you a fairly good idea of what happened. I shall call this period 'Buniyaad: The Foundation'.

It all started when Jahanara Begum began to read the Urdu books that Nusrat Beg brought for her. She read them word by word, sentence by sentence. Though she knew the alphabet and could speak a little of the language, she found it difficult because her studies at home had been in Pashto. So when Nusrat returned from school in the evenings, she would ask him the meaning of phrases she couldn't understand and the pronunciation of words. She would note them down. Then they would read passages together. Nusrat was struck by her dogged determination. In a few months' time she could read Urdu rapidly. And speak it much more fluently. She began to read a little of the poets Ghalib and Mir.

'That day on the train, were you really reciting English poetry to me or was it some rubbish?'

Nusrat laughed.

'What did you think?'

'How could I tell?'

'Begum, it was pure, unadulterated English poetry.'

'Did you study a lot of English writers?'

'I did, and a lot of other writers too.'

Later, without realizing it, they found themselves sitting regularly in their little veranda at night discussing history and science and politics. Very often, Madanlal Khubchand would join them and they would talk about the American War of Independence, the French and Russian revolutions, Mahatma Gandhi, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and the Indian National Congress, Changez Khan and Napoleon. It was amazing. Sibi, a forgotten outpost, became the centre of the universe.

'Tell me about the Turk,' Jahanara asked one evening.

'Tell you about which Turk?'

'The man who stopped women from wearing the veil.'

'Ah! Kemal Mustafa, known as Atatürk! Why do you want to know about him?'

'You said that what he did was right. I want to know why.'

Nusrat started by giving a brief account of the Ottoman empire. How it began, grew and finally collapsed after the First World War.

'Now Begum, Kamal Atatürk was an army officer of this empire. He had seen it from the inside and he knew it was on its knees. The Greeks, the French, and the English had already invaded and were carving up what was left of the country. He had to beat them back first, which he did, and then he started to put his own house in order. He decided to create a modern state and he knew that you can't have a modern state if its laws are ancient. That's why he took on the priests and the qazis. Maybe it was harsh, Begum, but you can't have machines, factories and modern education, and religious madrasas at the same time. The madrasas had to go. He had seen the progress made by England, Germany and France. He wanted the same for Turkey.'

'He should have taken the path of Russia,' said Madanlal Khubchand.

'My friend, Kemal Mustafa is not a communist.'

'I know, and that is why he is wrong.'

'Are you a communist, Madanlal Sahib?'

'I don't know, but I agree with Bhagat Singh.'

'I too think he was a good man . . .'

'But,' Madanlal smiled. 'There's always a "but" when people talk about revolutionaries, isn't there, Nusrat sahib?'

'Yes, there is. I think I prefer the patch of Khan Sahib. He wants the British out too.'

'I don't know how you can say that. Khan Sahib and Gandhiji are playing their game. You need to create your own rules. You have to fight the British and kick them out. That's what is required. You talk about Kemal Atatürk with such fondness. All he had to do was to go one step further and he would have reached the position of Bhagat Singh.'

Jahanara was surprised by Madanlal's passionate outburst.

'Was Bhagat Singh a communist?' she asked.

'He was.'

'Babajaan says that communists don't believe in God. Is it true?'

'It's not true. What they say is that believing in God does not matter.'

'That's not a good thing.'

Nusrat Beg nodded.

'That's what Kemal Mustafa says too. He doesn't like the Russians. He doesn't trust France and England either. That's why he is in such a hurry.'

'Did he ask the people for their opinion?' asked Jahanara.

'No. Maybe he felt that if he waited for their answer the French and British would be back.'

Jahanara shook her head.

'I don't agree with him. I think you must ask the people for their opinion.'

'Why?'

'Because when you want to make great changes, you have to ask the people.'

'All right, he didn't. I accept. But tell me, he passed a law saying men and women are equal. What is wrong with that?'

'Nothing.'

'Do you agree with it?'

Jahanara thought it over.

'I do. I think they are equal. But they are different.'

'All right, I'll accept that. What about the law forbidding the veil?'

'I don't know.'

'Is it right? Is it wrong?'

'It's not wrong. But is it right?'

'Why do you say that?'

'I like wearing the burqa.'

Nusrat Beg thought for a moment.

'Supposing you were to make a law about the burqa, what law would you make?

Jahanara laughed but Nusrat persisted.

'I'm not joking. What law would you make?'

'I don't know.'

'Should all women wear a burqa?'

'No.'

'Why?'

'All women are not Muslims.'

Jahanara thought about what she had just said and then she added.

'Maybe there should be a law that says women should not be forced to wear a burqa. If they choose to wear it, it is all right. If they choose not to wear it, it is all right too. Kemal Mustafa has to understand these things.'

That set Nusrat thinking. He remembered Jahanara's reaction after he had told her about Darwin's theory. She had been so surprised.

'Does he say our ancestors were monkeys?'

Nusrat Beg nodded. Jahanara Begum shook her head.

'I don't believe it. And even if it's true, God created monkeys.'

Many years later Nusrat Beg jokingly added an iconoclastic twist to his English translation of what she had said: 'God made monkeys out of us.' Everyone used to laugh. Yes, in those two

years of marriage they had become good friends and partners. A foundation had been laid.

And, in March 1935, Jahanara became pregnant. Nusrat Beg was elated.

'Are you sure, Begum?' he asked.

Jahanara nodded.

'Absolutely sure?'

Jahanara nodded again.

'Then we must let the world know. Call in the town crier, call in the muezzin! Let the drums roll! The family of Nusrat Beg and Jahanara Begum has begun!'

The principal and his wife Shahgul were told. So was Madanlal Khubchand.

'You are a very lucky man, Nusrat sahib,' said Madanlal.

'Why? A lot of people have children.'

'They do. But you have a wonderful wife.'

Nusrat Beg looked at Madanlal Khubchand and hugged him.

'That is a very fine thing to say, Madanlal sahib. A very fine thing.'

Madanlal smiled shyly. Shahgul began to give Jahanara a massage every morning. 'Her legs have to be given a rub,' she said, 'otherwise water will collect at her ankles.' A drink of crushed almonds and pistachios in half a glass of milk was also regularly administered. 'It is to strengthen her muscles and bones, and it is also good for the child's eyes,' she said.

'Incredible,' thought Nusrat. 'This concoction is a two-in-one. Good for the muscles and bones of one person, and good for the eyes of another!'

For the next two months, he conducted a three-way conversation between himself, Jahanara and the unborn child. Jahanara couldn't help laughing. As he left for school in the morning he would wish her goodbye and then wait for her response. She had to respond twice. The first was for herself and the other for the child. Nusrat would then nod and leave. The

game would be repeated in the evening when he arrived from school. Most conversations between them had to be conducted in the same manner. On reading a passage from a book he would ask Jahanara for her opinion. 'It is good,' she would say. Then he would lean forward and stare at her belly. 'And what do you think?' he would whisper. 'It is very good,' Jahanara would reply. Nusrat would straighten up and announce, 'The child has good taste, very good taste.' Yes, Nusrat Beg was a happy man.

It was around the middle of May 1935 when Dost Mohommed Khan suggested that Jahanara should go back to Quetta to have the baby because she would be able to rest there with her family and the medical facilities there were much better.

'She will have the child here,' said Nusrat.

'Wouldn't it be better there?' asked Jahanara.

'Look Begum, the facilities in Lahore are better than Quetta. Why not go to Lahore? And, following that logic, the facilities in London would be better still. Where does it end?'

Jahanara didn't say another word. For the first time she sensed an edge in his voice and she was hurt by his sarcasm. But she also knew that it was a cover for the real reason. The next day Nusrat was confronted by Shahgul, the principal's wife.

'You're just being stubborn,' she said.

'I'm not.'

'You are. I know about your pledge to her parents. But this is not asking for help. There's only one doctor here and he's an ass. Do you want Jahanara to be under his care? And, while she's in Quetta, you can always visit her. How far is it anyway?'

'How do you know about the pledge?'

'Jahanara told me about it.'

Nusrat felt foolish. Five days later Jahanara, escorted by Shahgul, boarded a train for Quetta. It was for the first time since their marriage that Jahanara Begum and Nusrat Beg were separated. What surprised Jahanara was that when she arrived in Quetta, which was five hours later, there were already three letters

waiting for her, written in Urdu. They were all from Nusrat Beg and were marked one, two and three. In the first letter he told her that he was sorry for being sarcastic and that he would miss her. In the second he told her that he was coping quite well without her, but he missed her terribly. In the third letter he asked her to come back. Jahanara smiled. She couldn't believe that he had written these letters and posted them before she had even departed.

Jahanara had been gone for barely a week when Nusrat felt the tremors. He was asleep at night when his bed began to shake. It lasted for a brief while and then it stopped. Then the tremors started again and stopped. Nusrat Beg jumped out of bed. The next morning it was on the radio and all over Sibi that an earthquake had struck and that its epicentre was in Quetta.

Nusrat Beg felt dizzy.

When he reached Quetta, it was as if the town didn't exist. Most of it had been flattened and reduced to rubble, there was not a locality, a neighbourhood that was not badly affected. The only part left standing almost untouched, was the British garrison beyond the encircling ditch. There were thousands of corpses lying around and thousands more waiting to be discovered beneath the debris. Hundreds of dead bodies had been carted away. There was a wave of wailing and a stench that surrounded the city as the living and the wounded tried desperately to look for family and friends. British troops and officers could be seen everywhere helping with the relief work. Nusrat rushed around trying to locate Jahanara's home. The earthquake had levelled all signs of identifications. As he ran down a street, he saw a self-standing building suddenly come down in a haze of dust. He turned a corner to see a man screaming as he stood over the corpses of five people. Nusrat recognized him and stopped. It was the driver of the tonga who had brought him to Jamal Khan's home. The man was screaming as he looked up towards the sky: 'Ya Allah, Ya Allah!' He turned and saw Nusrat and, perhaps recognizing him, grabbed him by the collar and screamed again. 'Only their homes were

spared. Only the homes of those English bastards were spared. Whose side is God on? Tell me, whose side is He on?' Nusrat freed himself and began running again.

And then he saw the outer gate of the Khan fortress. The adjoining wall had collapsed almost entirely and the gate stood eerily erect protecting nothing. Nusrat entered the compound and his heart sank. Three of the five homes had collapsed. One of them was the home of Jahanara.

There was a large crowd of people helping to clear the debris and Nusrat could see members of the Khan clan among them. He looked around for Jahanara but couldn't see her. Nusrat spotted Jamal Khan and hurried up to him.

'Where is she?' Nusrat asked.

'She's well, don't worry. She's in the garrison hospital but she'll be all right.'

'How badly is she injured?'

'She has two broken ribs. A wall collapsed on her and she was trapped below a beam, but we got her out in about an hour.'

'What about Rukhsana and the others?'

'It was a miracle, Nusrat. The first tremor was terrifying. It woke everyone up and we began to run out into the open. All of us had barely come out when the second tremor occurred. Then the houses came down.'

'Why couldn't Jahanara make it out in time?'

'She did. But before we could stop her, she ran back inside saying she had to collect some letters. That is when the second tremor occurred.'

She had run back to collect his letters. She had run back into the house and she had nearly died.

Nusrat entered the hospital. It was chaotic. Hundreds upon hundreds of injured lay in rows on the ground in the compound outside. Hundreds more lay in the corridors outside. Inside the

hospital it was as bad. There were two hundred or more people in rooms that could accommodate only fifty. They were lying on the floor, on beds, under the beds, or standing and leaning against walls because there was no other space. He walked on and reached the special women's ward. And finally he saw Jahanara. She was lying on a bed in the corner of the crowded room and with her was her father, mother and the matriarch. Jahanara saw him enter and she smiled. Then she began to cry.

'I've lost our child,' she said to him.

Nusrat Beg held her hand.

'I had named him Jamal.'

'How did you know it would be a boy?'

'I just knew.'

She was crying again. Nusrat wiped her tears and whispered.

'Begum,' he said, 'what is important is that we have each other. Isn't it?'

Jahanara looked at him for a long while and then smiled.

This is the end of the story of the beginning of the story of love between Jahanara and Nusrat Beg. I believe it is also the story of laying a firm foundation to build upon, to create and to share it. It is a foundation that no storm in the world can shake because its roots run very, very deep.

soliloquy 1

Why am I writing about a few memories of my childhood and a fantasized love story? Does the past really matter as those billionaires who feature regularly in the Fortune 500list relentlessly sculpt the future? Where incredibly powerful corporations in the oil and gas, armaments, food, agriculture, finance, insurance, pharmaceuticals and retail industries are shaping the destinies of people and countries? But wait! There is another image too that comes to my mind. An image of naked, living men heaped one on top of the other in a prison. They squirm, scream and flail their arms and legs as the prison guards laugh and click their photographs in a jail called Abu Ghraib in Iraq. Hidden in that image histories of civilizations that I have to retrieve. So I must go on.

A tale of a dangerous student

It was the year AM 380 (or AD 990 according to the Roman calendar). The student lifted his eyes from the book he was reading and asked his teacher.

'Master, there is this scholar who says that the world we live in is in constant motion. Could it be true?'

The teacher looked at his pupil in astonishment.

'Our earth in motion? How can that be? It is the heavens that move while our earth stays steady. Who is this scholar?'

'His name was Aryabhatta and he lived a long time ago in the land of Hind. He said that just as the stars and the sun move across the skies, so does our earth.'

The teacher looked at the student intently.

'You read about too many things, Ali Husain. Now tell me, if the earth was in motion would we be able to stand? Would not our homes and trees fall and the oceans overflow?'

'But master, if we know that the heavens and the stars move, why can't it be that our earth moves too? Why should it be different?'

'It is the grand design of our creator, Allah.'

Ali Husain looked at his teacher and nodded. Then he quietly muttered to himself.

'I think the grand design of Allah must be studied further.'

'What did you say Ali Husain?'

'Nothing,' murmured the ten-year-old Ali Husain.

a tale that sets me thinking

I am about twelve years old and I have read a tale. It affects me deeply. In a strange way it sets the tone and the agenda for a journey I will take in the future.

the story of Ekalavya

He was a young lad, full of energy and excitement. And overflowing with dreams. One day he saw the grand master teaching some young princes the art of archery. Ekalavya watched and watched. Soon he wanted to learn to be a great archer too. Gathering courage, he approached the master and made his request.

'Oh master,' he said, 'will you teach me the art of archery?'

The master looked at him and said, 'No, I can't. You are an outcaste. You are an untouchable. It is not for you to learn these things.'

Ekalavya went away sad and depressed. But he was not a lad to give up and he made a plan. He made a statue of the master with his own hands and, under the shadow of the statue, he practised. He spent hours and days and months at it. He learnt all the secrets of archery and became very accomplished. In fact he was better at it than all the princes.

The master and the princes found out about Ekalavya's skill. How could an untouchable be allowed to reach such heights? How could he dare to learn what was not his to learn? How could he be stopped?

One day, the master approached Ekalavya and asked him the secret of his success. Ekalavya told him that it was he, the master, who had taught him. The master was surprised.

'I didn't teach you, I sent you away,' he said.

'Yes, you did,' said Ekalavya. 'But I made a statue of you and it watched over me as I practised. It was therefore under your guidance that I learnt everything I know.'

The master smiled. He had found a way to stop the young man.

'If I have taught you,' he said, 'you have to pay guru dakshina. You have to pay the teacher his dues. Those are the rules.'

'Whatever you ask for, oh master, I shall give,' said Ekalavya.

The master's eyes narrowed.

'Give me the thumb of your right hand,' he said.

Ekalavya was stunned. He looked at the master in silence and then he nodded.

'If that is what you ask of me, so be it.'

He cut off the thumb of his right hand and gave it to the master. Ekalavya would never be able to shoot an arrow again.

I read the story and was numbed. Many years later a song sung by John Lennon summed it up for me.

They hurt you at home
They hit you at school,
They hate you if you're clever,
They despise a fool,
Till you're so fucking crazy you can't follow the rules.
(From 'Working Class Hero')

I've always wondered about rules. Why is it never a level playing field for the poor and the disenfranchised of the world?

a time to remember and a time to forget

It was both a school and a dream that Baba and you had for your children. How much of it was realized, I do not know, but I need to talk about it. What do I remember about my school years? Do I really want to remember? Sometimes I wish I could forget, but I think I owe it to you to remember. So let me start. I shall begin with a memory and I shall call it:

'*the family's honour*'

I am about eight years old. It is late in the night and I get up from bed to find my brother missing. I glance towards the hall to see that the lights are on and my family is huddled in conversation. They are talking in whispers. I enter the hall and the conversation stops.

'What's happening?' I ask.

There is an imperceptible pause, which gives me a clue, before Ammi answers.

'Nothing,' she says. 'We were just talking.'

She is smiling but I am not convinced.

'Okay,' says Baba. 'Everybody go off to sleep.'

Everybody gets up. The lights are turned off. I turn to my brother as he comes into our room.

'What were you talking about?' I ask.

'Nothing,' he says and goes to sleep.

I go to sleep too, sensing a conspiracy.

The next morning I have forgotten all about the conspiracy as the three of us walk to school. We get back in the early evening

and I quickly get to the dinning table where the regular treat awaits us: meethi roti or maleeda or suji ka halwa with malai. The three of us eat and then Baba arrives. He rarely comes back this early. We greet him in unison: 'Salaam alaikum, Bajaan.' 'Wa alaikum as-salaam,' he greets us in return and promptly goes in for a bath. We finish eating and Ammi asks us to have a bath too as we are all going for a walk.

'Why?' I ask.

'Just like that,' says Ammi.

But she says it very quickly and looks away from me. I suddenly get suspicious again. I know something is up.

We all bathe, dress and go for a walk—Baba, Ammi, Talat, Aziz and I.

On the way Baba buys some peanuts from a roadside vendor and we walk down Sitla Devi Temple Road. We turn at Excella Restaurant and head towards Mahim Creek. As we pass Paradise Cinema, I am hit by a thunderbolt. It comes from my sister.

'Baba,' she says, 'can I change my school?'

I am shocked.

'You don't like our school?' I ask.

'No,' she says, 'I wish I could go to Canossa Convent.'

Canossa Convent is a girls' school run by an order of nuns. I just cannot understand why my sister would want to go there.

'You want to go to that school?'

She nods.

'My best friend Prabha is there. Sneh's there too.'

I am still shocked. Then I am hit by the second thunderbolt. It comes from Aziz.

'I want to change schools too,' he says.

I look at him, surprised.

'I want to go to St Michael's,' he adds.

I don't know what to say. St Michael's is a boys' school run by Catholic priests. I look at Baba and Ammi. Baba looks at my brother and nods.

'They're both good schools,' he says. 'And you have lots of friends there.'

That is true. Almost all our friends in the neighbourhood study in these two schools. I turn to my brother.

'Why do you want to go there?'

'It's a better school.'

'It's not.'

'It is.'

'It's not,' I shout.

'Don't shout, Saddu,' says Ammi.

'It's not a better school, but he wants to go there.'

'And where will I go?' I ask.

'You will go to St Michael's too.'

'I don't want to go there.'

'Listen, Saddu,' Baba says, 'so many of your friends are there. There's Gulu, Akbar, Lal.'

'You'll have so much fun there,' adds Ammi.

I am in tears by now.

'I don't want to go there! I like my school.'

There is silence. The family is standing at the entrance of Paramount Restaurant and people are turning to look at us. Baba decides to speak.

'Saddu,' he says quietly, 'we can't afford it.'

I look at him as he adds, 'Your school fees are too high.'

There is silence again. I am struck by this piece of information. The family looks at me. I stop crying and then I say softly, 'I don't want to change my school. Please, Baba, I don't want to change my school.'

The rest of the family looks at each other. There is silence once again. It is now that Ammi smiles.

'All right,' she says. 'Nobody is going to change schools.'

Everybody looks at each other once more, Ammi continues.

'Come on, let's have faloodas.'

We all enter Paramount Restaurant—father, mother and three children.

The regulars at the restaurant watch us troop in. We enter a

cubicle reserved for families. We have our faloodas in silence and head back home.

I have often wondered about that day, Ammi. There were so many clues about what was happening in our home. I remember Talat coming home from school two days earlier and giving you a note from the principal and then whispering something to you. When I asked her what it was about. I got a non-committal answer. Then I saw you handing the note to Baba. He read it as you watched him anxiously. There was about no conversation at the dinner table that day. Later, as we settled down to sleep, I saw you and Baba talking to each other into the night. The next day was Saturday and a holiday from school. As the family ate breakfast, I recall the terse conversation between you and Baba. Didn't it go something like this?

'You can always ask Chopraji, can't you?'

Baba nodded.

'You've worked on the film for eight months, wasn't he supposed to pay you something?'

'He was.'

We three children ate silently, pretending not to be listening. But we were.

'He says he likes the idea, but says it sounds like a documentary,' Baba said.

'So?'

'He wants me to change some parts of the story. I told him I can't, it will ruin it. But I will talk to him today.'

Baba finished his breakfast and got up to change his clothes. We were still at the breakfast table when he returned to wish us goodbye.

'Khuda hafiz,' he said quietly.

A chorus of whispered Khuda hafizes was returned.

Baba left for work. As was your practice, you went to the corner window of our apartment to see him off. This time I remember Talat and Aziz following you. And I, not knowing why,

followed them. As Baba walked down the road you watched him. At the gurudwara, as usual, he turned to look at you and waved. You waved back. But I knew this time it was different. Why were the three of us at the window too? Baba reached the grocery shop and turned once more. You waved to each other for the last time and Baba disappeared from view behind the branches of the large gulmohur tree. I still remember the three of us walked away but you stood at that window for much longer.

Maybe I was too young to decipher those codes, Ammi. But later everything fell into place, we hadn't paid our school fees for a few months and the school authorities had given you and Baba a deadline; pay the fee or else. That was what the problem was all about. Baba had written a story for a film producer and gone to him to ask for an advance. The producer agreed but he wanted some changes made in the storyline. Baba stuck to his guns and the producer wasn't gong to pay for something he didn't want. The net result was that there was no money coming in. The next night was the one of the late night meeting of the family, minus me, a conspiracy into which I had inadvertently stumbled.

It was some conspiracy. I am trying to imagine the plan being prepared. It would include a walk, a talk and, perhaps, a prayer, so that a child of eight can be persuaded to change his school. I try to imagine Talat preparing the statement that would set the ball rolling. A thirteen-year-old saying something she doesn't believe in so that her youngest brother can be roped into a plan that will save her family's honour. Her ten-year-old brother does the same thing. And the eight-year-old brat, this is me, not agreeing, not understanding and not interested in saving the family's honour. And, in the end, a mother saying 'let's go and eat faloodas'.

Now let me tell you a story that I do remember. It is the story of a Pathan woman who did not give up. She was in the same situation as you were. But she knew she had a secret weapon. She

had magic in her hands, '*haathon mein hunnar*', and she put it to use.

the tale of 'bag lady'

She went to the wholesale cloth market and bought reams of velvet of different colours. Then she bought cardboard sheets. She bought beads and sequins and silk drawstring. And, she got down to work. She began making velvet handbags. Evening bags for fashionable ladies. The cardboard was cut into ovals for the base. The base was stitched into the bag. That was not all. The silver beads and sequins were used for embroidery. She created five basic patterns for the silver embroidery. And she had five colours of velvet: black, deep blue, deep green, purple and white. In a day, she made three bags, two and a half in the daytime and the remaining after dinner. On weekends, with her daughter helping out, she made five. In a week she made twenty-five bags.

Now she had to deal with the marketing part. She couldn't afford an agent. So, loading the bags in a suitcase, she walked to Matunga station. From there she took a train to Dadar station. She changed trains at Dadar and went on to Victoria Terminus station. From there she walked to Crawford Market and sold her wares. They were an instant success. The twenty-five bags were sold in no time. After deducting all expenses including travelling, she made one rupee a bag, which was a total of twenty-five rupees. That month she earned about one hundred rupees. The next month she went on to sell her bags to one of the biggest stores in the city: the Army and Navy Store at Kala Ghoda. The bags were a great success here too. In a month she now earned two hundred rupees. The store gave her a contract for other kinds of bags. It wanted fancier ones with more intricate embroidery. She was now earning three hundred rupees a month. She did all this for about two months, besides cooking and cleaning and taking care of her family at home. Her children's school fees were paid, her family's honour was restored, and when her husband finally settled down to a regular income, she went back to being just a mother—in the year

1954. She was a great bag lady.

The tragedy is, I never got to tell her that. So I'm telling her now.

now on to my school

It was an Imperial school. No, that is not correct. It was actually a poor third cousin of an Imperial school that was trying very hard to pass off as the real thing. Unfortunately, the colour of the skin and the accents of its students and teachers gave it away. Nevertheless, my school tried hard to represent an ethos. It tried even harder to represent a culture and civilization that was epitomized by Great Britain. Poor cousin or not, it was going to create young men and women who would be proud to be part of a civilization that had stamped its seal on so many others with such resolute authority. This civilization was the master of all it surveyed.

It was true and I, as a child, found it unbelievable.

How else can one explain that less than two hundred thousand British, which included those in the army and police, judges, lawyers and civil administrators, businessmen and traders, carpetbaggers, adventurers and just plain thugs, engineers, doctors, nurses, teachers, architects and painters, photographers, railway and postal employees, ruled over a country of more than three hundred and fifty million people! They had humbled the great Mughal empire. Every skirmish, battle and war we read about in our history books in school was an eye-opener. Can anyone explain how an army of five hundred 'native' troops and two hundred British ones could put an army of five thousand Indians to flight? Are these statistics really true? I would read about five thousand 'native' troops and five hundred British ones destroying an army of fifty thousand Indians. It was shocking. They beat everyone. They beat the Mughals, Marathas, Sikhs, Jats, Rajputs, Deccanis, Bengalis and anyone else who dared to stand up. A host of our historians say that many of these defeats were the result of

treachery, lack of adequate weaponry and cohesion in our ranks. That may be partly true. But these arguments cannot deny an undeniable truth. We were soundly beaten by a force that was, so often, vastly outnumbered.

On reading these history lessons in school, how I wished that somebody, somewhere would be able to stand up to them, because I knew, intuitively, that they could be beaten. But the facts spoke otherwise. The kingdoms of Bengal, Gujarat, Rajasthan, the Deccan and further south folded up with just a whimper. The others collaborated. They actually crawled. The only ruler who put up a real fight, even beating them occasionally, was Tipu Sultan. I silently cheered him on. When the British finally defeated him, he was killed and his family stripped of all power and sent into exile. Tipu Sultan had revealed the chinks in their armour and so he had to be made an example of. My secret hero had fallen and I sank into gloom.

Try to imagine me in my school and try to imagine the times. These British victories symbolized 'Western' discipline, purpose and modernity triumphing over 'Eastern' lack of discipline, purpose and feudalism. It also symbolized 'invincibility'. With these victories came the railway system, buses and trams in the big cities, schools, universities, the post and telegraph system, the judicial courts, Parliament House, Rashtrapati Bhavan, the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta, the Victoria Terminus in Bombay, the revenue collecting system. For a child it was awesome. And, added to all this was the language, English. This was the language of power, of victory and, once again, of invincibility. It was a language of a poetry and literature. It was a language for conversation, debate and for laws. It was also a language for science, philosophy and ideas. And, if need be, it was a language for war. It almost seemed as if the British, exhausted by the Second World War, bemused by the mass movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and irritated by the acts of the left revolutionaries, decided to relinquish 'the white man's burden'. Take your independence and be damned! But in their departure they left behind potent symbols of their rule.

My school was one such symbol. It was the leftover of a colonial past that refused to be a leftover. It had gone into a new avatar, a new phase. It was a 'civilized native' oasis in the desert of 'pure native' mayhem and unruliness. And the parents who sent their children to this school were of two kinds: the first, those who believed in the 'Raj' and lamented its departure; the second and much larger group, those who aspired to its 'ideals' for the future. This was a school that would equip a child with all the necessary skills to deal with an emerging, post-colonial, modern world. Hidden in this system, unfortunately, was a very large dose of something else.

That something else is what I need to talk about because it played a very important role in my life and I have a few things to get off my chest.

The day began with the singing of hymns. The entire school assembled in the hall. The principal and senior teachers stood in the front and the junior ones in the wings. The drill master and his aide were at the back to make sure there was no irreverence in the ranks of the students, especially the back-benchers. And then it was time for prayer.

Lead, kindly light
Amidst the encircling gloom
Lead Thou me on.
The night is dark
And I am far from home
Lead Thou me on.

There was a solemnity and grace about the hymn. And the music was sober and dignified, yet sufficiently elevating. It was so different from the jarring noise of the bells and the filth at the Sitla Devi Temple and from the hordes of beggars and flies at the qawwalis at Mahim darga. This civilization approached its God differently.

Occasionally, of course, there were slip-ups with hymns that had forgotten to erase history, such as:

Onward Christian soldiers
Marching off to war
With the Cross of Jews . . .

Or,

Stand up, stand for Jews
Ye soldiers of the cross . . .

Now this particular hymn did get its fair share of irreverence with the back-benchers in the hall quietly singing;

Sit down, sit down for Jesus
The buggers at the back can't see.

But, by and large, prayer time in school was an uplifting experience and I, as a child, was deeply impressed.

Years later, after a great amount of reading and after getting my history sorted out, I began to wonder about the writers and composers of these hymns. They had done a great job of covering up the slaughter and plunder that the European practitioners of this religion undertook with such vigour in large parts of Asia, Africa and the America. The words and music of most of the hymns had such calming effect that it almost seemed as if the God of this religion had forgiven most of the acts of His followers because they had conquered a world in His name.

To get back to my school years, I was impressed by a number of other things too. For instance, on Parents' Day I would see quite a few of the fathers in coats and ties and the mothers in fashionable dresses. They arrived in chauffeur-driven cars and they gave their children imported chocolates and cheeses, and sandwiches, cutlets and colas. The other parents would stand by and observe them in awe. As for me, I would have happily sacrificed my aloo parathas and herbal sherbet for a sandwich and a cola. I would have probably sacrificed much more for a taste of those imported chocolates and cheeses.

I must make a digression here and tell you that since those early days of my school years, things have not changed much in India. In fact they have probably become worse after you passed away. The almost incurable need among the rich and famous in India for everything 'Western and branded' has reached frightening proportions: whether it be clothes, footwear, watches, handbags, soft drinks, alcohol, jewellery or anything else that claims to represent the 'good life'. From the hedonistic images that are constantly seen on television screens and in cinemas, the craving has rapidly filtered down to all sections of society and one sees a desperate urgency in everyone to keep pace with the latest trends. The only good to emerge from all this is that a flourishing counterfeit industry for almost all the famous international brands has developed. The Indian genius for great imitation is legendary.

Back at school, by the age of eight I was ashamed of what I was.

It wasn't so at the beginning but within a year, these thoughts would cross my mind, from then on, it just got worse. I would get angry with myself for thinking this way and yet I couldn't help it. This civilization doesn't scream out its superiority, it lets it seep in and enter the blood stream. It subtly lets the 'native' know that it has the power to help him deal with the present and the future through its sciences, its dress code, its architecture, its food, I call it the slow and steady colonization of the mind. And, in the forefront of the colonizing process was the language.

'Ammi, it's not iskool, the word is school.'

'That is what I said, iskool.'

'Look at my mouth carefully: School.'

'Iskool.'

'Let us start again: Skool.'

'Iskool.'

'Ool.'

'Ool.'

'Now put it together. School.'

'Iskool.'

I would look at you in despair and you would laugh.

Why the hell was I so concerned? I was just ten years old and I had already started feeling superior. I wish you had thumped me. Did the pronunciation of the word 'school' really matter? Why did I want you to get it right? Besides, I had not realized that people who had studied in Urdu and Pashto had a problem pronouncing English words like school, screen, style, scrub, stare. Most of them would end up saying iskool, iscreen, istyle, iscrub, istare. And, each time I would look at you and shake my head. How many times did this happen?

'What is the problem?' you would always ask. Quite honestly, it was not a problem. I had made it one.

the scholar and the boatman

Mulla Nasruddin was ferrying a scholar in a boat across a rough sea. Somewhere in the middle of the journey the Mulla made a statement that infuriated the scholar because it contained several grammatical errors.

'Have you ever studied grammar?' asked the scholar.

'No,' said the Mulla.

'Then half your life is wasted.'

The Mulla shrugged his shoulders. A little later a storm occurred and the boat began to heave and turn.

'Have you ever learned to swim?' asked the Mulla.

'No,' said the scholar.

'Then your whole life is wasted, because the boat is sinking.'

Mulla Nasruddin jumped off the boat and swam away.

I wish I had read this story earlier, but now I must continue

my tale of trying to be a 'scholar'; and there is one memory that really sums it all up.

a tale that could not be told

I must have been fifteen years old and was reading Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. You had seen it lying on my table and had walked up to me with it.

'Can you tell me about this book, Saddu?'

I hesitated.

'Ammi, it is set in the time of the French Revolution and it would be difficult for me to explain because it's not just a story.'

'So what is it?'

'It's about a time too.'

'So tell me about the time.'

'Ammi, it's very complex.'

I had used the word 'complex' in English.

'What does that mean?'

'What does what mean?'

'That word you just used.'

'Complex? It means it's not simple.'

'So . . . the . . . story . . . of . . . the . . . two . . . cities . . . is com . . . plex.'

Ammi, you had spoken the entire sentence in English. I smiled and nodded.

'And . . . my . . . son . . . cannot . . . make . . . it . . . simple.'

'I'm really sorry but . . . it's not like the stories of Scheherazade.'

You nodded and we both kept silent for a while. But I knew I had hurt you, and to make thing worse, I had used the stories from *A Thousand and One Nights* as an example of simplicity. These were the tales you had read out to me when I was a child. As you got up to leave the room I still remember what you said:

'Read those stories of Scheherazade again, Saddu. There must be a translation in English somewhere.'

I remember what happened next. It was at the dining table that Baba cleared his throat and began to speak.

'So, Saeed, it seems you have decided you have nothing more to say to your mother?'

I looked at you, then at Baba and remained silent. Baba continued.

'You know both of us are so proud of you because you read so much.'

Baba paused but I knew there was more to follow.

'But don't ever believe that what you are reading is enough.'

'Baba, I don't think I meant to say that to Ammi.'

'Maybe you didn't. But never forget there is much more to learn and it lies hidden and needs to be discovered.'

I nodded and kept silent.

Coming back to the tales of *A Thousand and One Nights*, I did read those stories again. About four years ago I was doing a master workshop with the film students at the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute in Kolkata, and I got hold of an English translation of the book. It was a revelation. It is not just the story of a young woman who needs to tell tales night after night to save her life. That is the decoy of the anonymous author(s) and it is absolutely brilliant. Scheherazade, the protagonist and narrator, is a punctuation inserted to make the stories speak to one another. The narration flows endlessly like the everydayness of a lived life. Here, time has been abandoned and yet Scheherazade keeps count of each day, defying death with nightly tales that have the power to hold the attention of a sultan, that whet his appetite and insidiously manoeuvre him to plead for more and more and more. Oh, the seduction and deviousness of words!

What were the origins of this surging mass of stories? Born from a Persian collection, some say also from an even older Indian source, the unruly stories found a home in the ninth-century court of the caliph Harun ar-Rashid. I pause to think, when did these

stories find their way to the Moorish centres of culture in Palermo in Sicily and to Cordoba and Sevilla in Spain, and, through further translations, into Europe? Did the crusaders who spent about two bloody centuries in the Holy Land pick up other stories too? I pause to think some more. Was it only these stories? How many other tales, poems, songs, romantic ballads and legends compiled from various civilization and languages quietly entered the imagination of Europe in the same way? The authors of this immense literature threw the challenge of narration to the world, only to find unacknowledged echoes in the works of Petrus Alfonsi, William IX of Aquitaine, Chaucer, Dante, Boccaccio and so many other early European masters. So much of the origins of European poetry and literature can be found if one digs up a deliberately buried past.

It took me forty-three years to realize that *A Thousand and One Nights* is a milestone in the literary journey of man. As the saying in Urdu goes: '*Der aaye, magar durust aaye.*' I came in late but I did arrive.

But I must continue with my school years. Though you never said it, I think you also saw something about my school that nobody else did, and it frightened you. You knew that it could be a stepping stone for me to reach out to a world, but there was another side to it— it could also cut the ground from under my feet. It did Ammi, it did. How could the learning of this new language somehow make the learning and speaking of my mother tongue seem unnecessary, even unimportant? Why did I allow this to happen? Did I really allow it to happen? I have never understood the reasons. What I did know, even as a child, was that I was drifting away from a lot of things that were important to me and I couldn't stop the drift. Then, one day, a very important event occurred in my life.

it was the day you slapped me

I was, I think, ten years old and I was screaming and shouting that I wasn't going to spend time with a stupid maulvi to learn Urdu. I ranted and raved and even broke a few things because I knew Baba wasn't around and I had to deal only with you. I had always believed you were 'manageable', so I put up this great show to express my displeasure. You bore my dramatic performance for a while and then you slapped me.

I decided to learn Urdu.

But to continue with the slap, it shook me. I had been thumped on the shoulder quite a few times for things you felt I had done wrong and I had accepted it. I also knew that those thumps were more of an admonishment than anything else. The slap on the face that day was different. I remember looking at your face and what I saw is very hard to describe. It was a kind of despairing anger. The anger of someone who knows the battle is lost and that this is the last throw of the dice. Do I believe I deserved that slap? I'm not sure, but I do believe I had a great problem of attitude and it started right at the beginning at school.

the tale of Sharmaji

'A, aa, ee, eee, oo, ooo, ay (as in nay), I, oh, ow, um, aha.' There were sniggers in the classroom as Sharmaji, our Hindi teacher, taught us the alphabet. He looked like a tired man and was always dressed in a somewhat frayed coat and tie. 'Ker, ka, ki, kii, koo kooo.' I saw the other children sniggering again and I sniggered too. I didn't quite know why but it got to be a habit. The tradition of sniggering at him had started before I joined the school and it was passed on by each generation of students. It seemed that we all knew a secret that the school authorities did not even try very hard to hide; Sharmaji was employed because they had no choice. The teaching of Hindi was the law of the land and the authorities, unfortunately, had to abide by it. Given a choice, they would have dispensed with his services. It seemed that Sharmaji too realized

this and therefore accepted his position in the pecking order. He was one of the most elderly of the teachers, but every morning at prayer time he would stand in the back row with the assembled junior teachers. He walked down the corridors with head bent, and he knew that the 'Namaste, Sharmaji' from the students as they passed him by was said in jest and not out of respect. He also knew that his complaints about student misbehaviour in his class were not taken too seriously by the principal. More importantly, the student knew it too. They went home and regaled their parents, family and friends with stories of what they had done in his classroom. I did it too.

I still remember the first time. I must have been about eight years old and a classmate, while Sharmaji's back was turned, decided to take his own lesson on the alphabet, 'Ker, ka, ki, kii, KAKA', he whispered. The boys and girls in the class tried to suppress their laughter but couldn't. We found it hilarious that he had included the slang word for shit as part of his lesson. Sharmaji turned around to find out what had happened. He never did. When I told you the story at home, you smiled.

The second time I told you a Sharmaji story, it was different. It was about how I had thrown a piece of chalk at a classmate and how after that, whenever Sharmaji's back was turned, chalk began to fly across the room. I found it funny and I thought you would too, but you didn't.

'He should have twisted all your ears?'

I was surprised by your answer.

'Why, Ammi?'

'Because he is a teacher and he should be respected.'

I was not going to tell you any more stories after that response. And there were so many more. For Sharmaji it was relentless, day after day, year after year. But in a strange way, he got his revenge.

One day he revolted. He was about to retire and I was in the tenth standard when he announced in class:

'All of you are great fans of Shakespeare, Byron, Conrad and Wordsworth. The tragedy is that none of you are even remotely aware of the worth of Munshi Premchand and Tagore. There are

so many wonderful writers and poets in India and you do not know a thing about them. I feel sorry for you.'

We did not feel sorry for ourselves then. Except that years later I did read some of the works of Premchand and realized Sharmaji was right. Premchand, so much like Gorky, was the master teller of rural and small-town tales of north India. His grasp of the caste and class divisions of those feudal times in transition, of power equations and the human stories within these equations, opened up a new world for me. And then I read Rahul Sankritayan, another great Hindi writer. He was a Marxist abstractionist, a merchant of ideas. His analysis of an India moving from a past into an uncertain future was electrifying. Later still I discovered the strength of writers like Harishankar Parsai, Mahasweta Devi, Manik Bandopadhyay, the poets Namdeo Dhasal, Dushyant and Paash, and the brilliance of the stories of the *Mahabharata*. But the reason for writing this here is not only to grant Sharmaji his due. It is also because people like him continue to be causalities even now. This paragraph is a lament about a world that has unfortunately tilted so drastically in favour of writing done in the English language that no other language, except to some extent the European ones, has really been able to reach out to the world. And the world is so much the poorer for it. It is so much the poorer for it.

But now I must get back to Urdu.

the tale of Maulvi sahib

I think my recounting those stories to you about my Hindi teacher brought fear to your heart. Perhaps that was why you employed the Maulvi sahib to teach us Urdu. You had taught Talat earlier yourself and she had been a good pupil, but I think you felt that Aziz and I were tougher nuts to crack. I still remember how you made sure we were present when he arrived and how you

made sure for those two years that we were at the dining table with him, two days a week. What you didn't realize was that sitting at the dinning table with him wasn't good enough, for we had other plans.

We would distract Maulvi sahib with innumerable questions for which we did not really want answers. We would invent headaches and fevers as excuses for why we had not done our homework. Worst of all, we went to the extent of blaming Talat for our actually existing but missing notebooks. And yet he tried to teach us. God knows, he tried.

I still remember him vividly: a tall, gaunt man with a hawk-like face, dressed in a long kurta and pajamas that were always above his ankles. He was sun burnt and he had incredibly large hands. It was with these hands that he would magically write the alphabet on the takhta. He would dip his qalam in the inkpot and, starting with a sweep and ending with a flourish, he would create the 'ain' or the 'quaf'. It was wonderful to watch him. Years later I would realize that the sheer dexterity with which his hand moved, with which he could thicken or thin out a curve or a line, with which he could make a stem soar and suddenly come to a stop, came from a great tradition. It was from the same tradition of calligraphy that wrote the verses of the Quran on the Taj Mahal and hundreds of Islamic monuments across the world. How easily he could make a letter of the alphabet enter the space of another or stretch out, almost impossibly, to reach another. We loved watching him write but not doing it ourselves. The net result was that he was subtly manoeuvred into doing most of the writing while we did most of the watching. It was the only aspect of his classes we really paid attention to. The rest, as they say in Hindi/Urdu, entered through one ear and exited the other.

There is more to the tale of the Maulvi. And this is the part that is the most painful. Do you remember the number of times he found the tyres of his bicycle punctured? Well, I must tell you now that they had the air removed by my friends waiting in the shadows. It was an act of revenge for his coming to our home. It was an act of revenge for being slapped. Even today, the image of

the man walking back down the road with his 'fixed' bicycle haunts me. He was a good, earnest man and whatever he is, I hope he will forgive me. Along with his departure went my chances of learning Urdu.

You tried to pick up the pieces from where Maulvi sahib had left off by taking up our classes for the next two years, but I know you had seen the writing on the wall and given up. All I can say today is that I do know the alphabet and I can read Urdu, though very hesitantly, I can follow the spoken language and speak it functionally, but when it comes to poetry and literature, I need help. I need a lot of help.

This is what hurts me the most today.

I feel a deep sense of loss for not being able to relish the incredible grace and sophistication of the Urdu language and its literature. For not being able to partake in the feast of ideas and the visions of poets who were, more often than not, philosophers, magicians and iconoclasts as well. It is only in the last fifteen years that I have come to realize the worth of Mir, Zauq, Ghalib, Iqbal, Faiz and Firaq. They were poets who could, arrogantly and with a flourish, reveal a world and its secrets in just a couplet and yet leave so much to the imagination.

Take this example of a poem attributed to the poet Daag.

Zahid sharaab peene de masjid mein baith kar
Ya aisi jagah bata de ke jahaan Khuda na ho.

An inadequate English translation of this couplet would be something like this:

O Pious One, allow me to drink wine in the mosque
Or, show me the place where God does not exist.

The poet is a laconic minimalist. In just two lines he lays bare the stupidity of all those petty-minded people who, through their interpretation of religion, decide what is right and wrong. And to emphasize his point, he selects a most potent symbol: the mosque. It could equally be a church, or a temple or a synagogue. And yet the couplet is not only about misplaced religious piety. What the

poet is also demanding is a larger vision for mankind trapped in the desert of detail.

Then there is Ghalib who, I firmly believe, was one of the greatest poets ever in any language. In this little couplet, about his own work, he reveals a sardonic, self-deprecatory humour:

> *Yeh masail-e tassawwuf, yeh tera bayaan Ghalib,*
> *Tujhe hum wali samajhte, jo na badah khwar hota.*
>
> By your mystic musings and your eloquence Ghalib,
> I would have thought you a prophet, had you not been a drunk.

I had often wondered about this kind of iconoclasm that permeates the work of so many poets. Many of Them are so irreverent, ironic and, at times, seem to be pushing the limits of acceptability to the extreme. On reading a little bit of history I realized that this iconoclasm comes from the long tradition of the Sufis. The Sufi movement had started in the eighth century as an attempt to question the tenets of orthodox faith and to reveal deeper truths about the relationships between man and man, man and God, and man and the universe. And there was one person who graphically represented the ethos and spirit of this movement. Her name was Ra'abia Basri.

the legend of Ra'abia Basri

Born in the ninth century AD in the ancient trading port of Basra (in modern-day Iraq), Ra'abia was considered a 'woman overcome by spirits' as she walked through the souks and town square reciting poetry that few could comprehend. One day, it is said, she was found running through the narrow lanes of the town with a bucket of water in one hand and a burning torch in the other. When asked what she was doing she replied that she was going to extinguish the fires of hell with the water and set fire to paradise with the flaming torch. Faith, she believed, was beyond the fear of

hell and the rewards of heaven. She was some lady.

A hundred years later another person summed it all up: the Moorish scholar, philosopher and poet Ibn Araby. He lived in the eleventh century in Spain and had this to say: '"This is forbidden! This is permitted," the jurists tell us. But never expect them to tell you that you are responsible to yourself. This is precisely what you are reminded of on every page of the Quran. If one were to listen to the jurists, relations between God and man would be nothing more than those of a master and slave. Faith and philosophy begin where their arid laws end.'

I *think* Ibn Araby was a good man.

It was with this kind of spirit that the journey of the Sufis began. Poets, mystics and philosophers fanned out across the Islamic empires and spread the message of love, tolerance and inclusiveness. Ibn Araby, al-Farghani, Jalaluddin Rumi, Amir Khusrau, Moinuddin Chishti, Firdausi and hundreds of others shook Islam by its roots. In the subcontinent of India, even as the Sufis and mystics spread their universal message, an inspired Bhakti movement led by Kabir, Guru Nanak, Namdev, Meera, Sant Tukaram and others launched its assault on brahminical Hinduism. A civilization emerged that transformed almost every aspect of life. Music, food, dance, architecture, clothes, festivals and even religious ceremonies reflected that change. The subcontinent would never be the same again. Most importantly, a language was born that symbolized this incredible fusion. It was called Hindustani/Urdu, and it is still the most widely spoken language across India and Pakistan.

Yes, the poetry of Dagh and Ghalib comes from a very long tradition. It is amazing what the study of history can reveal.

But why am I talking about these things? Does the past really

matter? I do not know. And yet, why do I feel that I am running short of time to retrieve my scattered and perhaps inconsequential inheritance? Again I say, I do not know. Having stated this, I get back to my school years.

a tale in my defence

'Dien Bien Phu,' said Baba with satisfaction as he put his English newspaper down.

'What is it?' I had asked.

'It's the name of a small place in Vietnam and the French have been thoroughly defeated there.'

'They have?' I asked incredulously.

Baba nodded. It was 1954, I was eleven years old and I was elated.

I'll put it down to suffering from a split personality, but I was so happy to hear this piece of news. At one level I was in awe of this Western civilization, and at another I was so satisfied to see the chinks in its armour. The ordinary peasants in a poor country had humbled a modern European power and the French were forced to leave. Unfortunately, before doing so, the country was partitioned and later it would take another, much more savage and painful war, to reunite the two halves.

And this time the most powerful nation in the world would bite the dust. I have recalled this memory just to tell you that I was not a complete 'sell-out'.

how much can one forget?

It was in 1968 when I was driving past my school that I turned and looked the other way. I wondered why I had done it. I then realized that I had been doing so for a while and it set me thinking. Why was I turning away? Maybe it had to do with the guilt I felt

about Sharmaji and the Maulvi sahib. Maybe it was also because I had tried so hard to improve your pronunciation. May be it was for that much-needed slap that should have set me right but did not. Maybe it was because I preferred sandwiches to aloo parathas.

By 1968 and, as I said earlier, after getting my history and politics sorted out, I could add other reasons too. Maybe it was also because my school didn't have a clue about the student Ali Husain and what he represented. Maybe it was also because it didn't know of the Che Guevara, Ben Bella, Ho Chi Minh or Patrice Lumumba. Or of Aryabhatta and Ekalavya. Or of Namdev and the Sufis. There are so many maybes.

Does this brief account of my school years make sense to you? I am not sure. If it doesn't, all I can do is to quote the poet Ghalib once again:

Bak raha hoon junoon mein kya kya
Kuchh na samjhe Khuda kare koi.

I don't know what I'm saying in my madness
I hope to God no one understands.

the grand banquet

The great Sultan had come to visit the district where Mulla Nasruddin lived. And, since he had arrived, he threw a grand party and invited all the local dignitaries. The Mulla was not one of them. But, being a man who believed he was the equal of anyone and also a man who loved a free meal, the Mulla, on his faithful donkey, arrived at the entrance of the huge tent where the feast was being held. The guards, seeing him shabbily dressed and straddling a donkey, threw him out. The Mulla was deeply hurt and humiliated.

He went back home and pondered. Then, he opened an old wooden chest and looked at the clothes he had. Right at the bottom of the chest was an ancient silk robe and an ornate turban. The Mulla wore the robe and turban and headed back to the Sultan's tent. Seeing the robe and turban, the guards let him in. The official in charge of protocol, on seeing Mulla in an ancient robe and turban, deduced that he must be a scholar and a wise man. He led the Mulla to the high table. The Sultan, on seeing the Mulla, came to the same conclusion and he got up to receive him and escorted him and seated him by his side.

Mulla Nasruddin partook of the feast with great gusto. But he did something strange too. After every mouthful he ate, he splattered another handful on to his robe. The Sultan, trying not to offend this wise man, did the same. The other guests, on seeing the Sultan, did the same too. Soon, the great Sultan, his entourage and all the local dignitaries were in a mess. So were their wonderful robes. But the Mulla didn't seem to notice. The Sultan, finally in exasperation, questioned the Mulla about this strange ritual. Mulla looked at him nonchalantly and answered, 'This is no ritual, your Highness,' he said. 'I have been judged by my clothes. Since these

clothes allowed me to partake in the feast, they deserve a share of the food too.'

A lot of people have heard and even, perhaps, read some of the stories of Mulla Nasruddin. But no one knows the origins of this character. Tales of his exploits, irreverence and home-grown wisdom stretch from China across Central and South Asia, from West Asia right up to the Caucasus across North Africa. A lot of countries have laid claim to him: Turkey, Uzbekistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Egypt, Morocco. He is a genuine international folk hero and he represents the spirit of iconoclasm in Islam. He is the classic Fool. Here was a man who poked fun at royalty and pomp and protocol, who attacked mindless ritual, orthodoxy and everything that stifled the spirit of man. His stories and adventures are numerous and the ultimate tribute to him lies in an open air sculpture at Samarkand in Uzbekistan. It shows Mulla and his donkey, reading the Book of Wisdom. Both of them are so completely engrossed in the book that the donkey has a hoof on the page they are reading to prevent it from turning over in the breeze.

Years later, I stopped by the sculpture and I could not help smiling. There was the Fool and his beast soaking up the wisdom of the ages. God bless them.

'hey! hey! LBJ!
how many kids did you kill today?'

This was the one of the most popular slogans for those people in America who marched against the war in Vietnam. LBJ were the initials of the President of the United States of America, Lyndon B. Johnson. Sometimes I wonder about those marchers. Were they marching because the war seemed to be lost? Were they marching because too many American soldiers were dying? Or, were they also marching for the people of Vietnam where, finally, about three million people had to die? I will never really know the answers. All I can say is that the anti-Vietnam War movement was, perhaps, the first instance of the mass mobilization of people across the world to oppose one of the most brutal and unjust wars fought in the history of mankind. This movement secretly mobilized me.

a secret journey to clarity

I sit in the economics class in college and I am told that the price of any commodity is determined at that point where the supply curve and the demand curve meet. The theory is neat, clinical and precise.

'Can't supply be controlled and demand created so that the price can hit the roof?' I ask.

There is laughter in the class as the professor smiles.

'Of course it can. But then the theory remains the same. The price is determined where the controlled supply curve meets the created demand curve.'

The class laughs again. I try another tack.

'Let's take potatoes, sir. Everybody eats them, right?'

'You're right.'

'There will always be a demand for them, right?'

'You're right?'

'So, if I buy up the whole stock of potatoes and then control the supply I can then dictate a price, right?'

'Yes.'

'Therefore only those people who can afford it can eat potatoes, right?'

'You're right. But the theory remains the same. The price is determined where the controlled supply curve meets the demand curve of the people who can afford it.'

'True. But shouldn't the theory be explained this way because that is what happens most often in the marketplace? Besides, it brings in other important elements. We see the manipulation of prices by man to satisfy his greed. And it is this manipulation that denies another man food at an affordable price. It makes the theory so much easier to understand, and instead of just curves we have

the presence of man.'

Don't you remember those times in the 1950s and 1960s in India? There were famines and droughts and shortage of essential commodities all over the country. How often you would go to the ration shop to fight for the rights of Asha, our maid, and come back after being told that the potatoes, rice, dal, wheat or onions were out of stock? You would come home angry and sit in your easy chair in the veranda and curse those hoarders, traders and politicians who were making windfall profits as Asha stood by and cursed too.

'It's those swine, those blackmarketeers, memsahib?'

'Somebody should have them whipped! We must talk to the MLA.'

'He is the biggest crook.'

'Then why did you vote for him?'

'You voted for him too, memsahib.'

'How do you know I voted for him.'

Asha keeps silent. There is a pause and then your murmur:

'I wonder if Panditji knows about all this crookery.'

Panditji, of course being Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, the man you had great faith in Ammi. Remember those times? My 'other' journey began with these kinds of memories. Though the Government of India has a ration policy on essential commodities to safeguard the interests of the poor, the policy would be subverted. Hoarders, in league with local politicians, were also making a fast buck as they manipulated the prices of all food grains in their neighbourhoods. When multiplied across the city of Bombay and across the country, the scam would reach gigantic proportions and scale of the loot would be in the hundreds of crores of rupees.

Another example of a scam was the prohibition policy of the Government of India in the 1950s and 1960s. It was imposed

supposedly to improve the wellbeing and health of the people. The policy also had a moral and cultural tone to it. The consumption of alcohol was not 'Indian'. This policy became such an incredible joke in Bombay because thousands of illicit bars selling country-made hooch began to spring up all over the city. The situation got so bad that the stench of surreptitious fermentation hung over the cityscape for more than a decade and everyone could smell it, even the people who had imposed the policy. But they laughed and looked the other way. Who would want to close down a pipeline of a regular cash flow because fortunes were being made through bribery and the sale of illicit booze? Gang and turf battles between the numerous hooch warlords began. Then the smuggling of imported liquor, gold and silver began. The rise of the organized underworld could be traced back to these times and the politics of illicit booze, gold and silver dominated the city for a long, long while. Don't you remember those times? Don't you remember the scams that occurred in the adulteration of milk, sugar, medicines, petrol and diesel, food grains and cooking oil. Even in talcum powder. Anything that could be adulterated was. The fact that it still happens today is another matter.

What really surprised me was that, though you so often seemed to be in despair about the state of affairs in our country, you retained a certain amount of faith in its future. That little indelible black ink dot on your fingernail in election after election was a testament to that.

Which party did you vote for? Though you never told us, it was, I believe, the Congress. I still remember how much you cried when Nehru died. I remember you perking up when Lal Bahadur Shastri became the prime minister.

'He's a good man,' you had said.

'How do you know?'

'Just look at his face. I can tell he will do good things.'

'You can tell this by looking at his face.'

You had nodded and smiled. I had smiled too and I think you

were right, though I have never been able to understand this face-reading practice of yours.

'Did you vote for him?'

'Why should I tell you?'

I shouldn't have posed the question because I had known the answer. But I have other questions to ask you. For instance, what were your politics based on? Was it based on any kind of analysis? Did you ever distinguish between what a political party said and what it actually did in practice? Or, was your political judgement based on pure intuition? Here I was, in my growing wisdom, trying to understand the emerging social, economic and political forces in our country and trying to analyse the impact of imperialism on domestic policies, and there you were, looking at faces. It used to exasperate me.

I am still exasperated but I must get on with my journey.

When I graduated in economics and political science in 1965, I had no idea of the kind of work I wanted to do. My academic record was about average and, quite honestly, I had been a drifter. You knew it too, Ammi. I still remember, the anxiety on your face when you would catch me reading the plays of Arthur Miller or Bertolt Brecht or reading the verses of Palestinian poets when I should have been studying my class textbooks. But graduate I did and I needed a job desperately. I was in love with Jennifer and I had to show something 'settled' about my situation before I could propose to her. So that's why I did that one-year diploma course in Marketing and Advertising. It was after this course that I landed my first job as a copywriter in an advertising agency and you were so happy when I handed you my first pay cheque; you were also very happy to see me get rapidly promoted, get married and move to Delhi. I am sure you felt that your son was 'settled' and I know you were very worried for me and my family when I finally quit the profession.

What I want to tell you was that it was doomed from the start. The fact that it lasted for seven long years still amazes me.

The first reason for this was the war. In 1965, the United States sent in troops into Vietnam. As usual it said it was going in to defend freedom and democracy. I followed this war closely as the US army tried to bludgeon its way to victory. But it wasn't just the war that began to engage me Ammi, it was what I began to read and the literature I became exposed to. Over the past several years I had been reading novels by Sartre, Greene, Steinbeck, Camus and Conrad. I had enjoyed them and I felt one couldn't wish for more. By the late 1960s and early 1970s however, I was exposed to a literature of another kind. It was incisive, polemical and yet, unbelievably poetic.

the secret journey begins

It started with Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* which achingly unveiled the rape, loot and dehumanizing process in Africa. I read about the harsh realities in Latin America through the works of Paolo Frere and Ivan Illich. The poetry of Pablo Neruda, Aimé Césaire and Mahmoud Darwish eloquently revealed the anger, pain and hope of underprivileged. Ammi, for the first time I was reading literature that went beyond the concept of literature. It was the literature of suffering. It was the literature of the vast masses of the world that had been marginalized for so long. It was their voice. For the first time I had found answers to the questions that had bothered me ever since I was a child and it was heady cocktail. Along with the cocktail came the new icons. Che Guevara, Nelson Mandela, Fidel Castro and Ho Chi Minh had become the symbols of revolts and revolution against imperialism across the world.

How could I mix what was going though my mind and still write a headline to sell soap? How could I write about the benefits of a skin cream, as the image of a young Vietnamese girl, naked, her body scorched and violated by napalm and screaming in pain, seared through my mind? And then there were the marchers, who,

in their millions, protested against this ghastly war. I was living in two worlds. I was married, I had two children and I needed the job. I began to hate every day of work.

There was another war too and this time it was being fought in India. In the late 1960s, a group of people had launched a movement to overthrow the Indian State through armed revolution. They were called Naxalites, after the village of Naxalbari where the movement began. Fed up with the corruption, the insensitivity and the feudal warlords that characterized the Indian State, young people across the land flocked to their call. They were engineers, doctors, teachers, students, peasants and tribals. The State clamped down heavily, and viciously, on them and yet the movement spread. I remember you asked me about them and I still remember my evasive answers.

'Why do they have to fight with guns and weapons?' you had asked.

'Maybe they feel they have no choice.'

'Why do they feel that?'

'Ammi, they say they have tried the election process but their lives haven't changed. Whenever they protested, they were beaten and jailed.'

'So many of them are dying now. They seem to be good people.'

I had kept silent, Ammi. But yes, they were good people and I had been meeting some of them in Delhi where I was working and later on in Bombay, Trivandrum and Calcutta. There was a despairing idealism in so many of them. It was now that I began regarding Karl Marx, Engels and Lenin. I began to attend study groups and debates. The Naxalites had been outlawed by the government and though I was on the periphery and more of a bystander to their cause, it was getting dangerous. Jennifer, who is a Christian, was getting extremely nervous with all those Trotskyites, anarchists, radical poets, painter sand assorted leftists passing through our house. So often they would leave their banned

literature with us, considering our home a safe haven. There were clandestine meetings and phone calls in the night which made Jennifer more nervous.

a tale of a nervous mother

I remember a conversation that I had with you I think in 1972. You and Baba were talking about events in Vietnam. It had started with a picture in your Urdu newspaper that showed a South Vietnamese police officer shooting an arrested Vietcong suspect at point-blank range on a busy street. You were shocked by the image. Your conversation with Baba had proceeded for quite a while and you had finally said:

'What is America doing in that country? So much killing and bombing! They are like elephants in a sugarcane field!'

I had laughed at your description of the US army as a herd of elephants in a sugarcane field. You had smiled too. You decided to repeat the phrase in English.

'Like bull in china shop, right?'

'Yes, Ammi. Like a bull in a china shop.'

'They should go away and just leave those people alone.'

'Ammi, but America says it is there for the good of the people of Vietnam.'

'Those people know what is good for them and what is not. Don't think they are stupid.'

'I don't. But America says it is out there to protect democracy.'

'Bakwass! Do you protect democracy like this? By killing and destroying? Will those mothers of those dead children ever forgive them? The Americans can say what they like but everyone knows why they are there.'

'Why are they there?'

'It has to do with gold or diamonds or something, how would I know?'

Sensing an opportunity, I tried to slyly dip in the 'left' point of view.

'The Russians are supporting the people of Vietnam in their fight against the Americans.'

'It just makes things worse. The killings will go on and on. They should go home too.'

'And then what will happen?'

'Don't try your tricks on me Saddu. I know what you're up to. Russia, Russia, Russia. Now you tell me, why do they have only one political party?'

'Ammi, the Party represents the interests of all the workers and peasants.'

'What about the others?'

'It's a workers' state, there are no others.'

'Why can't there be five workers' parties?'

I got exasperated.

'Why five?'

'Because I believe all workers do not think the same way. Just like all mothers do not think the same way and all fathers do not think the same way.'

Baba had laughed. There was silence for a while.

'Are you a communist, Saddu?'

Ammi you had posed the question suddenly and I was taken by surprise.

'I don't know Ammi, but I'm reading a lot about them.'

'Do you believe in God?'

'I don't know.'

I still remember the look on your face when I said that. It seemed you didn't know what to say. I decided to ask you a question.

'Ammi, what would you say if I told you I don't believe in God?'

You thought for a while.

'I would say nothing, Saddu.'

'Would you be worried about me?'

'I would, because I'm your mother.'

And then you laughed but I knew you were worried.

But those were heady days, and today, when I recall those times, I can't resist smiling at the sheer adventure of it all. We actually believed that revolution was just around the corner and I was hooked, hooked to the idea that the world could be changed for the better. I would read about young student leaders like Tariq Ali, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Rudi Dutschke who were leading millions of people across Europe as they opposed the war in Vietnam. I read the reports of the jury headed by Bertrand Russell on the War Crimes Trial against the Untied States. In Latin America, there were revolts across the continent. In Africa, the liberation movements in a number of countries had grown in intensity.

Each day at work became an ordeal for me and I still didn't know what to do. The most incredible part of it all was that my boss, Mr Jog Chatterji, seemed to understand my dilemma and also the dilemma of quite a few other people in our advertising agency who happened to be 'sympathizers' to the Naxalite cause. At the cost of his job and also the possible closure of his advertising agency, he allowed us to function and looked the other way. When I recall those times I have always wondered why he did what he did. Was he also a man who once had dreams about his country? If he did, when did he leave those dreams behind? I guess I'll never know. What I am grateful for was the fact that he allowed us to continue working. I also knew I had to get a move on and I didn't know where.

a wife takes matters into her hands

It was now that Jennifer, who, having gotten over the initial shock of the radicalization of her husband, took the initiative. She had seen me as I despairingly headed off to work each day and she decided to do something about it. I got up one morning, in late 1972, and there she was with sheets of paper sitting on the bed in front of me.

'Sign these,' she said.

'What is this?' I asked.

'Application forms for admission to the Pune Film School.'

I was amazed. She had gotten the forms, filled them up for me and wanted my signature to send them off. She was aware of my great interest in cinema and she had decided that if I need to pursue a career in it, the best way to do so was to get formal training. I signed the forms in gratitude. I know this move of mine shocked you and Baba a great deal. I knew you were worried about the children and how we would be able to manage.

'Are you sure you want to do this?' Baba had asked.

I nodded.

'How will you manage?'

'Jennifer will work for three years till I graduate.'

'And what will you do after that?'

'I don't know, Baba, but I'm so happy with what I've done.'

'You've chosen a difficult path Saddu, but if you are happy, I think you've done the right thing.'

He said nothing more and I was grateful for his support. For the next three years Jennifer would work and I would study at the film school.

Christian or Muslim?

There is one more story I would like to recall before I go back to my 'other' journey at film school and my work in cinema. It was, I think, in 1966 when I told you and Baba about the girl I was in love with and wanted to marry.

'Her name is Jennifer.'

'So, she is a Christian.'

'Yes, a Roman Catholic.'

Baba and you looked at each other.

'Was she in college with you?' you asked.

I nodded.

'Her father is a surgeon and her mother is a wonderful person.'

'Have you talked to them?'

'I have and they have agreed.'

'All right,' said Baba, 'we agree too.'

We all smiled at each other, but I had kept a little bit of crucial information hidden.

'There is one problem, though,' I added. 'I can only have a church ceremony. No other religious one.'

There was silence and both of you looked at each other.

'What do you feel about that, Saddu?' you had asked.

'Ammi, it doesn't make a difference to me.'

'It does to me.'

'Why?'

'Would her parents have agreed if we had insisted only on a nikah?'

'I don't think they would have.'

'All right, so let's only have a civil ceremony. No nikah, no church.'

'Ammi, you're making it difficult for me, please. They won't agree to that.'

'I am just making a point, Saddu. It's easy to say yes when your conditions have been met.'

It was Baba who intervened now.

'Begum, try to see it from his point of view.'

'Why should I?'

'Because it has to do with his life and he has to live it.'

We both looked at you.

'I don't think there should be any conditions when two people of different faiths want to get married. Is she a nice person?'

'She is.'

'What does she think about these conditions?'

'She doesn't like them, but this is what her Church insists on.'

'All right,' you said. 'If she's a nice person, let her Church have its conditions.'

You had smiled Ammi, but I knew you and Baba were

unhappy and yet you both had agreed. Both of you know what happened next but let me tell you how it happened.

I told Jennifer about your reaction and it set her thinking. A friend of mine calls Jennifer the greatest forensic expert in the world. And she is. She did a little research and a little hair-splitting. It seems she found out that she couldn't have any religious ceremony *after* the church one. I suppose the church believes that it must have the final say. So Jennifer decided to have the nikah *before*. I was elated and that's how we had the nikah quietly a day before the church ceremony. God bless her. In Bombay slang this is what is called *mandvali* or settling things through mutual understanding so that everyone is happy.

Now back to my film school.

After seven years of living in two worlds, I was now going into a profession that would not be a contradiction between what I thought and what I did. Besides, I loved films. As a child I would love to listen to Baba and Uncle Kedar Sharma as they talked about Frank Capra, Aflred Hitchcock, John Ford, P.C. Barua, Mehboob Khan, Bimal Roy and Sohrab Modi. So often I would listen in on those discussions that Baba had with the producers and directors.

'It's telling stories, Saeed. It's the skill of telling stories.'

'What kind of stories?'

'You could have stories of love and sacrifice, of bravery and courage in difficult times, stories about man's destiny.'

'I like your story of *Naya Daur*.'

'Do you know what the title means?'

'Of course, it means the New Age.'

'Why do you like it?'

'Because it's a love story, but it says so much more.'

'What else does it say?'

'It tells you about change.'

'Yes, Saeed. Machines bring change. But it doesn't mean it's always for the good. Sometimes there are people who suffer.'

'When will you sell it?'

'I don't know. My producer thinks the story is too serious.'

This was in 1953 and the film script was the same one that Baba had written and had tried so hard to convince the producer to accept. I liked the story too much because I genuinely felt it had so much to say and I wondered why the producer wasn't seeing it that way. You were witness to the battle that had raged for two long years with the producers saying that he wanted the documentary aspect reduced and the love angle increased, and Baba saying that it was a perfect balance and any change would destroy the film As usual, Baba stuck to his guns and the film was finally made and released in 1956. It went on to become a block buster and a landmark in the history of Hindi cinema. I was so proud of Baba. Then he went on to write another great story of people and their destinies: Waqt. It became another blockbuster and launched a thousand imitations. I loved it because it revealed the flow of time in which a close-knit family disintegrates because of a natural disaster and finally comes together again. The story had a sweep to it. It had grace.

The film school in Pune revealed another world of cinema to me. There were films from Asia, Latin America, the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Western Europe and the United States. Suddenly, the narrative, or the story line, became peripheral. There were films that dealt with relationships, films that dealt with ideas and philosophy, films that got out into the streets and dealt with ordinary citizens and their lives, films that were agitprop and revealed the struggles of people for freedom. I realized that there was so much more to cinema than I had imagined. There were so many different ways of seeing, of telling stories, of understanding our world.

There was the cinema of Reinhard Hauff and Rainer Werner Fassbinder that revealed the dark underbelly of German society. Jean-Luc Godard brought in a new flair and élan as he dealt with the France of the 1960s and 1970s. Then there was the political cinema of Fernando Solanas, Gillo Pontecorvo and Costa-Gavras.

Solanas documented the tragedy of Argentina as it sank into anarchy and military rule with his film *The Hour of the Furnaces*. Pontecorvo recreated the struggle of the Algerian people in his magnificent film, *The Battle of Algiers*. Costa-Gavras used the format of a political thriller to tell the story of Greek fascism in his film Z. At another level was the neo-realism of filmmakers like Vittorio De Sica and Satyajit Ray who dealt with the struggles, hopes and dreams of ordinary people. Let me tell you a funny story that somehow underlines what I was experiencing at film school.

what's in a name?

In our final year the great Indian filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak was conducting a workshop with us and he began by asking us our names. 'Ashok Ahuja', 'Kundan Shah', 'Vinod Chopra', some of us replied. Ghatak heard us out and with each name he shook his head sadly. We didn't understand why until he explained the shaking of his head to us.

'All of you are going to be film directors. Do you know what that means? It means you are going to be in charge of great acts of creation. With names like that you will not be taken seriously.'

We all looked at each other.

'What do you mean, sir?' one of us asked.

'Your names should carry weight. When your names appear on the titles people should feel that the film was made by a person of consequences.'

We still didn't quite understand. Ghatak continued dramatically.

'SERGEI MIKHAILOVICH EISENSTEIN. Shut your eyes and recite his name.'

Not knowing what else to do we shut our eyes and recited the name.

'Doesn't it carry weight?' asked Ghatak.

We opened our eyes and looked at each other. I think I now understood what he was getting at, so I raised my hand.

'What if I changed my name from Saeed Mirza to Saeed Akhtar Mirza?'

Ritwik Ghatak smiled.

'That's it! SAEED AKHTAR MIRZA! Your name has weight now. Now you have the name of a film director.'

We all laughed, but later quite a few of us would add this 'weight' to our names whether we made great films or not. It is a funny story but in it lies a lesson that we all learnt: filmmaking was a deadly serious occupation and we had better be sure about the films we made before we put our names to it.

a film I related to you

It was a film called *Tokyo Story* made by the Japanese filmmaker Ozu. It is a story of an elderly Japanese couple who visit their children who live and work in the city of Tokyo. The film is so unbelievably quiet and elegant as it unfolds its simple tale of the couple who think that they will be welcomed but actually become a burden for their children who are trying to cope with the frenetic pace of life in the city. It is, perhaps, also the story of a Japan that was modernizing and rebuilding itself rapidly after the Second World War, and would therefore have no time to hark back to a more genteel way of living.

the letters that were not letters

I was deeply moved by the film. As I walked back to my hostel room that night, I decided to write a letter to both you and Baba. The film had given me an immense sense of guilt because I had been living away from both of you ever since I got married and I had not kept in regular touch. The film, in a strange way, demanded that I write to you, which I did. I still remember as I tried to contain my emotions and struggled to find the words in Urdu that would convey my feelings. When I finished the letter I realized that it had ended up exactly as you would say to me: 'how

are you', 'I miss you', 'I am well', 'give my salaams and love to Baba'. I stared at what I had written, shook my head in despair and posted the letter. I couldn't do better than that and I am sorry. That was my third letter to you and it was in 1975. The earlier two letters were also 'some such rubbish' that I had written to you when I was posted in Delhi. I hope this journey makes amends for so much that was not said.

a tale of some friends who disappeared

My stay at the film school also brought me into contact with another wonderful group of young people. They were students from Iran and were studying at various engineering and medical colleges in the city. They would often come to the film screenings that were regularly held for film enthusiasts in the city at our school. I got to meet and befriend them. There were seven young men and four young women. It didn't take me long to realize that most of them were deeply political and were part of a larger organization of Iranian students, poets, writers, doctors, lawyers, engineers and young people across the world and in Iran who were opposed to the Shah and his autocratic regime. They were also opposed to the clerics and ayatollahs and believed in a secular, democratic republic. Their resistance movement in Iran was gaining momentum and the Shah's secret police, Savak, was savagely trying to suppress them. So many of them were shot and killed. So many of them were tried in kangaroo courts and then hung from lampposts and bridges. Hundreds of them were tortured and brutalized. The last I saw of my young friends from Pune was when they stayed overnight with me in Bombay before they returned to their country and joined the resistance movement. As a parting gift, they gave me a small rug as a token of their friendship.

'We shall meet again in better times,' one of them whispered.

I never saw them again, though I did hear one piece of tragic news. One of them, Jawad, the young Azeri, who had laughter in his eyes and wide, generous smile, was killed in a skirmish with the Iranian army on the Turkish-Iranian border. He had graduated in medicine and I know he would have made a wonderful doctor. Jawad was engaged to a law graduate, Shireen, and they both had plans to get married once their movement succeeded; they both believed it would be soon. It didn't happen that way. I have no idea what happened to Shireen or the others.

Ah Ammi, they were good people fighting for something they believed in. I would like a minute's silence in their memory and I am leaving a page blank in their honour.

A blank page left, a minute's silence held, a black armband worn in the memory of good people. Does it really make a difference? Who really gives a damn? I don't know, but somehow it seems important to me.

My 'secret' Marxist and anarchist passage continued right through the 1970s and 1980s and, as I read much more, the sordidness of imperialism and its impact on the peoples of the world came into sharper focus. A host of writers and thinkers across the world would add to my armoury and information: Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, Mahmood Mamdani, Eduardo Galeano, Krishna Raj, Debi Prasad Chattopadhyaya, Amin Maalouf, Irfan Habib, Eric Hobsbawm, John Berger, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Arnold Hauser, Angela Davis and so many more. If you add all this to what I had studied at film school, it was a guaranteed recipe for making my life more difficult. With the way I now saw cinema and the world, I would not find it easy to raise funds for the films I wanted to make and would make.

They would be branded as 'arty', 'farty', 'parallel', 'new wave', 'intellectual bullshit' and other words that meant 'not for mass public consumption'.

I still remember your bemused look as you emerged from the preview theatre after the screening of my first feature film.

'Will it work, Saddu?'

'I don't know. What do you think?'

'I don't know,' you had said and smiled nervously. You looked round at the other people as they emerged from the preview theatre. You even peered at their faces and tried to gauge their reactions but couldn't. Ammi, I wish you hadn't been so anxious for me. My film was a serious one and I had made it consciously hoping that there would be an audience for it. It was a path I had chosen for all my work and I knew it would be difficult, but looking at your face after that screening, it made me nervous too. Later, at home, you said what you had to say.

'Will all your films be like this one?'

'I don't know Ammi, but tell me what did you really think of it?'

'I think I understood it, but there was no story. That young man just seemed to be living aimlessly.'

'He was supposed to Ammi.'

'Yes, but couldn't he do something about his life? Couldn't he do anything?'

'He was trapped Ammi, and that's why I called the film *Arvind Desai ki Ajeeb Dastaan*.'

You had sighed.

'I just wish it had more drama. I'll pray for you Saddu.'

I couldn't help smiling when you said that. I didn't want god to intervene on my behalf and cajole an audience into seeing my film. All I really wanted was for it to recover its monies so that I could go on to make my next film. Luckily it did, thanks to the television sales abroad, though it didn't make much of a profit. My next two films did much better but my financial situation was still

quite precarious. It was television that came to my rescue and the programmes I made for it helped make my life much more comfortable and, since 1986, I think I now belong to what is called in India 'the upper middle class'. It is a class that has the smugness of not being too frightened about a future. So you needn't worry too much about me and my family.

But coming back to my films, and whether they be 'arty-farty' or not, I must tell you that they gave me a lot of satisfaction. The films were made on shoestring budgets, shot on real locations in homes, offices and on the streets of the city of Bombay and each shooting experience was an adventure. The cast and crew were a wonderful group of people who worked on the films for a fraction of what they could earn elsewhere and, thanks to their support, for the first time in my life I was saying what I wanted to say.

It was also because of the stories and the locations where I set my films that I was able to get in touch with a large number of people who belonged to what one would call the 'marginalized' of society. They were textile workers. They were carpenters and plumbers, street hawkers, petty thieves and pickpockets, small time gamblers, pimps, police informers, drug peddlers, factory workers, political activists, bootleggers, owners of small eateries and their clientele, policemen on the beat, pawn brokers, singing girls and their regular clients, daily-wage labourers and even hit men. The cast and characters which inhabited this world could not be imagined and night after night they heard me out, checked my credentials and then they finally opened up and began to speak out. We would sit down and talk about films, life, love and politics. Here was I, 'the intellectual', learning about a world I knew very little about.

who isn't a hoodlum?

I remember a conversation I was having with a group of young Muslim hoodlums. We were discussing films.

'Why don't you make films about real people?' one of them asked.

'I'm trying to.'

'You think that's real?'

A few of them smiled. I felt I needed to respond.

'That's why I'm here. You have to tell me where I'm going wrong.'

'You think we can tell you? We can't. You are the one who has read all those books, been to college and all that.'

I smiled.

'All right, can I ask you guys a question?'

Abdul, the youngest of the lot, nodded.

'Go ahead. Ask.'

'How come there are so many Muslims in this business?'

They looked at each other and laughed. Then Peera, their leader, muttered, 'Because we get caught and the others don't. Our names come in the papers and then people like you ask such questions.'

I thought that over. Peera now leaned forward.

'Can you tell us who isn't a crook in this city?'

The rest of the gang smiled. I smiled too as Peera continued.

'"Underworld", "underworld" everyone keeps saying. What is above the underworld is underworld too.'

The group found this very funny and looked in admiration at Peera, who also felt he had said something profound and funny. He stretched out his palms and the others began slapping it. Peera turned back to me.

'Do you think we like being what we are?'

'I don't know. You tell me.'

'Listen my friend let me tell you that most of us would quit the business if we were given the chance. One fucking chance. Will you give it to us?'

Peera looked at his group as they nodded. Then he looked at me.

'I know you think it is bullshit, I can see it on your face. But let me say that whenever I pray I ask Allah to help me get out. He doesn't seem to listen.'

Peera shook his head and murmured almost to himself, 'You don't know how lucky you are.'

There was silence for a while. Peera looked at me and smiled.

'Tell us honestly, after you finish shooting this film you will tell the world how you entered the gutters of this city and met people like us, am I right?'

'Perhaps not like that, but you are right.'

Peera looked at me closely.

'Then people will applaud you.'

I thought it over and nodded. The young man laughed.

'Will you ever come back to see us?'

'I don't know.'

'Let me tell you that if you do, some of us will not be around.'

'Why?'

'We will be dead.'

I looked at all of them and they all looked at me. One of them smiled.

'That's not a line from a film,' he said.

I looked at the five of them silently, not knowing what to say.

a tale of a man's 'importance'

I was sitting at Rafique's Shalimar Cold Drink restaurant. The restaurant was a meeting place in the night for a lot of people who operated in the very tough neighbourhoods of Do Tanki, Nagpada,

Byculla and Dongri. Rafique had allowed me the use of the place and to talk to the people who came there. I would sit at the back of the restaurant and work on my film script and very often talked to the regulars who would emerge from the night. They trusted me because I had been cleared by Rafique.

That night, as I sat in the back of the restaurant, a short, flashy man entered the restaurant and began to talk to Rafique at the entrance and I gathered he was enquiring about me because both he and Rafique looked in my direction several times. I continued writing. The man finished his conversation and sauntered towards me. He actually swaggered. Over his shoulder I could see Rafique gesturing to me and smiling. That meant that he shouldn't be taken too seriously. The man reached my table, pulled up a chair and sat down opposite me.

'Do you know who I am?'

I looked at him carefully and realized that he was around fifty years old but was trying to pass off as thirty. He had dyed his hair but the job was shoddily done and his face also betrayed his age. He was wearing a black-and-red shirt and dark trousers and a thick gold chain around his neck. There were gold rings on his fingers too. I was almost sure that the necklace and rings were fakes as I looked at him and smiled.

'No sir, I don't.'

'My name is Yakub.'

I nodded.

'My name is Saeed.'

'Yakub Tempo, that's what they call me. You can ask around.'

'I will, sir.'

The man didn't know what else to say as he kept sitting there. I glanced over his shoulder to Rafique and a few of the regulars standing at the entrance. They were silently laughing and looking at us. I shifted my gaze back to Yakub.

'I hear you are making a film about this neighbourhood.'

I nodded. Yakub thought that over and then continued.

'Did you ask for my permission?'

'I'm sorry, I did not. Can I have your permission to make this

film?'

Yakub thought this over too for a moment.

'You can. Remember when you come to neighbourhoods like this it is important to get the permission of the big guys.'

I nodded again. I also noticed that Vilas Nakashe, the numbers and booze operator of Byculla, had walked up to Yakub and was standing directly behind him. Yakub Tempo hadn't noticed it and continued.

'Now that you've got my permission, can you give me a role in your film?'

Before I could say anything, Vilas had thumped Yakub on the head, and what I had thought to be a mop of badly dyed hair on his head, fell off. It was a badly dyed wig. Yakub got up, embarrassed.

'Let him be,' said Vilas.

Yakub picked up his wig and looked at me.

'I was just joking,' he said.

Yakub ran a small transport service and that was why he was called Tempo.

Once in a while he would arrive at Rafique's and pretend to be a hoodlum. It made him feel important. He was a sad man who lived a sad life and once in a while he wanted to dream. I hired his services as a research assistant and he was an enormous help in providing me with information and tips about the people and life in the neighbourhood.

a vegetarian/non-vegetarian tale

I was shooting a film and the locale for about fourteen days was Goregaonkar chawl in Prabhadevi where almost all the residents were Brahmins. They were teachers, bank officers and clerks in government offices and were all strictly vegetarian. I had briefed my unit of about seventy people to be extra cautious in making sure that there would be no non-vegetarian food eaten, no foul language used and I had also told them that if they needed to smoke it should be done outside the complex and in the adjoining

street. A film crew in the city of Bombay is predominantly meat eating, sloppily tea drinking, noisy, cigarette smoking, foul mouthed and arrogant, and I was worried that they would carry these attributes into an area that was not used to them. I entered the location on the first day of the shoot with a little apprehension. I am also sure that the residents of the chawl had the same feeling too, even after giving me permission to shoot my film in their midst. Film crews are treated with a lot of suspicion.

I needn't have worried.

The crew didn't break the rules about the food but, most importantly, our anxieties about 'good' behaviour were completely misplaced. By the time the shoot was over, so many of the crew members were sharing meals with the residents in their homes, playing carrom together, celebrating birthdays, even cracking a few dirty jokes and, by the time we actually left there were tears on both sides.

What had happened?

The residents had seen the crew working and had witnessed the hard work and effort that went into the shooting of a film. The crew also realized that the residents were a bunch of ordinary people just like them except for the foul language. They were funny, hospitable, curious and helpful. It was a journey of discovery on both sides.

how the spirit of decent men and
women was broken

For over a hundred years the textile mills had been the backbone of the industrial might of the city and the hundreds of thousands of workers in the mills had become part of the city's folklore. Their songs, written by working-class poets, about their participation in the country's freedom struggle, their solidarity and their pride in the contribution they were making to a city were sung like anthems in the working-class neighbourhoods everywhere. But, by the 1960s, things began to change dramatically. There were no

fresh investments in machinery and technology, work was being outsourced and the rot had begun. By the mid1970s, the mills were running for shorter hours and many workers were being laid off.

Before starting my film *Albert Pinto ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai* in 1980, which dealt with the life of these workers, I got to meet them and their families. It didn't take me long to realize that there was a deep and silent anger in most of them and they couldn't understand why all this was happening. Very soon after the making of my film they went on strike.

It was the longest strike in the history of the working class anywhere in the world.

It lasted for about four and a half years. Two hundred and fifty thousand workers began a battle to protect their jobs and their families. The total number of people involved in the struggle was about one million and three hundred thousand. In the first year of the strike there was immense optimism that a solution would be found and thousand of others sympathetic citizens supported their cause. You, Ammi, were one of them, but you know what finally happened. By the second year, the support had dwindled. By the third year, a sizeable number of workers left the city and headed back to their villages and hometowns. The rest tried to find work as daily wage earners, vendors and even as domestic help. In the fourth year, just a hard core remained and by the end they had sold off most of their belongings, even their cooking utensils. They were starving, and finally they caved in. The struggle came to an end with a whimper. 'What's going to happen to their families now?' you had said, shaking your head.

So many thoughts crowd my mind when I think about those times. Were the workers being unreasonable? Some people said that the mills had been bled dry. The mill owners said that economies of scale, rising land prices, other fiscal policies and cheaper competition were making it impossible for the mills to

sustain themselves. Perhaps both points of view were valid. All I know is that decent, hard-working people were fighting for their right to exist. They were trying to tell a changing world that they were not obsolete.

Today, in the same spaces where once thousands upon thousands of looms hummed, there are huge shopping malls, state-of-the-art offices and luxurious apartment blocks. Very few people talk about those men and women who sacrificed so much only to get nothing in return.

☙ ☙ ☙

The dangerous student as a young man

The year was AH 390 (or AD 1000) when the Emir of Bukhara, Nuh Ibn Mansur summoned his young and famous court physician.

'Tell me, Ali Husain,' asked the Emir, 'how did you learn so much about medicine and the cures for so many diseases?'

'Why do you ask, my Lord?'

'It is because you are a young man and yet you have gained so much wisdom. How did you manage it?'

Ali Husain smiled.

'It was gained from my own experiences in dealing with the sick, but also because I studied logic and metaphysics thoroughly, my Lord.'

'And where did you study these subjects?'

'From my tutors, but also from the books I read in your library.'

The Emir laughed. Ali Husain smiled and continued.

'But there was one book that I found in the marketplace that really opened my eyes.'

'Which book?'

'It was a book on metaphysics by a Greek philosopher with a commentary by al-Farabi.'

The Emir's eyes narrowed.

'Al-Farabi? Quite a few of our scholars consider him a heretic.'

'My Lord, I think he has a wonderful mind.'

The Emir thought this over.

'How did this book help you?'

'It helped me to think deeply and maturely, to find the causes of things and the effects of these causes and then to find the cures, my Lord.'

'Does this knowledge only apply to medicine?'

'No, my Lord. It applies to everything around us. It helps us understand our world, the stars, and the universe. There is, I believe, a grand design behind all creation. Our job is to find out

the reasons.'

The Emir thought for a while again.

'Who was this scholar of metaphysics?'

'His name was Aristotle.'

'You mean you learnt all this from a heretic and a pagan?'

'My Lord, I believe you can learn a lot from people who think differently.'

The Emir smiled.

'Be careful, Ali Husain! Your knowledge might disturb quite a few of our scholars.'

'Why should it, my Lord? In fact this is such a wonderful way to understand Allah and all that he created. To know how and why things are the way they are,' said the twenty-year-old Ali Husain.



a time of brooding uncertainty

It was in late 1989 when I visited you and Baba. As I sat down in the veranda, I felt something was wrong because you seemed to be preoccupied. I turned to look at Baba and he silently indicated that I talk to you. I tried to but you didn't really respond and your mind seemed to be elsewhere. I didn't know what to say and turned to Baba once again. He shook his head too and sighed.

'Your mother is very sad, Saeed. Try to cheer her up.'

'Why is she sad?'

'It's what she has read in her newspaper, about that Ram Janmabhoomi movement. It has really upset her.'

I laughed.

'Oh that? Come on Ammi, are you taking those clowns seriously? It will die down and people will realize that it's all a gimmick.'

'It might be Saddu, but they are raising some terrible slogans.'

I knew it too, and I was also concerned. I knew that the Bharatiya Janata Party had whipped up an incredible amount of communal frenzy as they began the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. They had started the movement by making symbolic sacred bricks that would finally go into the construction of the temple dedicated to the birth place of Lord Ram. Unfortunately, the birthplace happened to be occupied by a mosque. The bricks, along with droves of the fiery faithful passed through towns and villages across north India on their way to their final destination in Ayodha, the ancient temple-town. Riots and death followed their passage and the Government of India had proved itself incapable of stopping the spread of communal frenzy. The slogans reflected the frenzy. 'The only place for the Muslim is the graveyard or Pakistan.' 'Wipe out the children of Babar.'

How could any government that claimed to be legitimate and democratically elected allow this to happen? Everyone knew what was going to follow as the vitriolic slogans reached a fever pitch and cadres of unemployed local lumpen, thugs by any other name, waited in the wings for the signal to launch their vicious sorties on the poor and the vulnerable. People were dying everywhere and yet it was allowed to happen. It was a chronicle of death foretold.

As I sat with you and Baba in the veranda that morning, I tried to cheer you up.

'Look Ammi, do you think the people of our country are stupid? Do you think they cannot see the game being played?'

'People are dying, Saddu. They are being killed because of those slogans. Why can't the government stop it? What are the police doing?'

I had kept silent because I believed that the government did not have the political will or the commitment to act against these forces. In fact, it was the political party I believed you voted for, the Congress led by Rajiv Gandhi, that had set things in motion. He was the one who had caved in to their demands and opened the floodgates to all that was happening and would happen in the future. For all his pronouncements on the need for modernity he had given in to medieval mindsets.

Rajiv Gandhi

Am I being too harsh on him? I don't think so because I also believe that he genuinely came in with fresh ideas and plans for development and change, but he had no clue as to what large parts of this country also represented. He dreamt of a technological and communications revolution that would launch India into the twenty-first century, but he didn't comprehend the agenda of his opponents who could whip up powerful emotions on issues that

would hurl the nation in the opposite direction. He didn't know that his country was living in several time zones simultaneously: ancient, medieval and modern.

Besides, I knew that the Congress party had also instigated gruesome acts of communal carnage in the past. They had also used the services of the same storm troopers to kill, pillage and terrorize in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra. And now, there was ferment all over the country. The Naxalites had blasted their way from Andhra Pradesh into Bastar, Orissa and southern Bihar, and the poor and marginalized had rallied to their call because they had nowhere else to turn. In the North-East of the country insurrections in Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura and Mizoram had become fierce. The state of Assam was in turmoil with a movement that railed against 'outsiders'. A few years earlier this movement had manifested its anger in one of the most savage acts of brutality in which more than fifteen hundred old men, women and children were bludgeoned and disembowelled to death outside a little village called Nellie. Thanks to a botched and rigged election, the militants in Kashmir, aided by Pakistan, were about to launch a protracted, armed rebellion. The lower and backward castes all over the country were being mobilized to demand their share of power. The upper castes, to retain some legitimacy, were whipping up a frenzied demand for the destruction of a medieval mosque, saying that it was built on the ruins of a temple that was the birthplace of the god, Lord Ram. All this was happening in our democracy. I wanted to tell you all this Ammi, but I didn't because it wouldn't have helped to cheer you up. So I sat silently.

'Where are we supposed to go?' you whispered.

I was shocked when I heard that and I didn't know what to say. You had made that statement softly, to yourself, and yet it seemed like a scream to me. After so many years of faith how could you ask this question? What had happened to your belief in a sovereign, secular, democratic republic? What could I say to

comfort you?

'Don't say that Ammi, it disturbs me.'

'Do you think I like saying these things, Saddu?'

I kept silent Ammi, but it was now that I recalled an event in Bombay that had occurred just after the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh security guards in 1984.

the tale of the taxi driver

I had got into a taxi and was heading home because the city was tense and all kinds of frightening rumours were floating around. The slaughter of the Sikhs in Delhi had begun and there were instances of random burning of shops and killings in other cities of north India. As is my habit, I sat alongside the driver, but I was in no mood for a conversation because I was shocked by the events taking place in the capital of India.

'Where to, sir?' asked the driver.

'Bandra,' I answered and glanced out of the window. The taxi started moving and we drove in silence for a while. I was thinking about Jennifer and the children because they had gone to Delhi for a holiday and were planning to visit Agra and Fatehpur Sikri and I was worried about them. As the taxi turned near the Mahalaxmi Racecourse, my gaze suddenly fell on the dashboard. What I saw set me thinking. Most dashboards of Bombay taxi drivers reflect the respective faiths of the drivers. Glued on are stickers of images of various gods and goddesses of the Hindu Pantheon. The Muslims would have the image of Kaaba or verses of the Quran. A Christian would have a cross or the image of the Mother and Child. What I saw on the dashboard was something that intrigued me. There was no sticker and it was clear that it had been removed in haste. What remained on the dashboard was the residue of the glue which gave me a clue as to what the image would have been. I looked at the glue residue carefully. It was the image of Guru

Nanak, the first Guru of the Sikhs. I glanced at the driver and what I saw saddened me. He was a middle-aged man, with short peppered hair and his face was darkened by the sun. But there were other clues on his face too. Clearly marked were those areas that would have been at one point shielded from the sun by a turban. Those areas, in the middle of the forehead, next to the hairline, and close to his ears, were lighter in colour. The driver was a Sikh, I was sure of it. He had removed his turban and cut his hair.

'Are you a Sikh?' I asked.

The driver turned to look at me and I saw a flicker of fear in his eyes before he recovered.

'No, sir.'

He continued driving. I looked at the dashboard again.

'There was an image of Guru Nanak here, wasn't there?'

The driver looked at the dashboard too and turned back to concentrate on the road. He didn't say anything.

'I'm a friend,' I quietly added.

The driver turned to look at me for a moment, turned away, and then slowly, very slowly he began to cry as he drove.

'I am a Sikh, sir.'

I looked at him as he wept.

'I am frightened, sir, so frightened.'

I patted him on the shoulder.

'It's all right. Don't worry. Nothing will happen to you.'

'Look what they made me do. I had to remove my turban, cut my hair and even remove the image of my Guru. What kind of a country is this?'

'I'm really sorry my friend. I don't know what to say.'

I tried to find words to relieve his pain and despair but I couldn't. We drove for the rest of the way to my home in silence.

As I sat in the veranda, I wanted to tell you about that man, Ammi. I wanted to tell you about an Indian citizen who had to remove all traces of his religion and his identify just to stay alive, but I didn't. I kept sitting silently.

'They will all be taught a good lesson at the next elections.'

'Who will, Ammi?'

'The politicians and these hooligans.'

I couldn't help smiling at your incurable faith that the next elections would sort things out, and I still remember Baba's sardonic laugh.

'Are you still talking about elections, Begum? Do you think the next elections will solve the problem?'

He had spoken softly but his tone had such an air of dismissal. I had never heard it before. Baba turned to me.

'You know Saeed, your mother is a great believer. So was I. but I have seen our country corrode before my eyes. We have a cancer that is growing so rapidly and your mother can't see it. She refuses to see it. She thinks the next election will wipe the slate clean and we will start all over again. But it won't happen. It won't happen because we have gone too far down and we can't turn back. I wish I could be like her, but I can't.'

'Baba, I know things are bad but the situation is not as bad as you're making it out to be.'

'Not as bad? Look at our country! There is not one leader in this land who has the courage of his convictions to lead this country out of the mess we are in and finally we have come to the stage where a political party believes that a nation's pride can be restored by the destruction of a mosque and the building of a temple.'

'It's a small minority, Baba.'

'You watch it grow Saeed, watch it grow. There are too many people in this country who have lost all hope, who will think that perhaps this is the solution to change their wretched lives. Many years ago the Congress party raised the slogan "Garibi Hatao", didn't it? Look at the chord "Remove Poverty" struck! The people believed it and that was their hope. What happened? Now this political party says that Lord Ram and the temple are the answer. It will strike a chord too because the people need to believe in something, in anything.'

'Baba, you're seeing such a bleak future.'

'It's not just India I'm talking about, Saeed. It's about our world. Too many leaders with small minds have taken charge and are running it. I think that man Gorbachev has realized it and is trying to turn things around, but I think it's too late because that fool Reagan will never understand what he is trying to achieve.'

'What is he trying to achieve, Baba?'

'I think he has seen what is happening to our world. Two opposing camps and both wrong. But at least he has realized what has happened. That man Reagan talks about the "evil empire" but he does not even know what his own country has become.'

I recall this conversation for two reasons.

The first was because I had never seen you and Baba so depressed. I wanted to say so many things to you that would help you relax, but I didn't. The second reason was that I was in a dilemma myself. I had travelled to the Soviet Union and what I discovered for myself about that country was something I had not told you and Baba about. I think it is time to tell you now.

a tale of my own predicament

In the summer of 1987, I went to Uzbekistan to make a documentary on the city of Samarkand. It was for the first time that I would be visiting the Soviet Union and I was excited by the prospect of getting a first-hand experience. What I saw over there wasn't very comforting. I had never believed in the reports that were published in the 'free' press of the 'free world' and nor was what I experienced anywhere close to what Western journalists had to say. Nevertheless, what I did see disturbed me. There were two Samarkands. The Samarkand of the day was friendly, open and wonderfully peaceful. The Samarkand of the night was something else. A large number of university students and young working people would drink themselves sick in the few hotels and

in the numerous parks of the city. It seemed that they had nothing else to do. Added to this were the shady characters of the night on the lookout for dollars and marks for which they were willing to part with enormous amounts of roubles. And then there was this insatiable desire in quite a few of the young for Levi's jeans, Nike shoes, Pepsi Cola or some such international brand name.

The same pattern occurred in Moscow with the added introduction of pimps who would supply girls only if you paid in hard currency. Here was a society that had free education and health care for all its citizens, a society that provided housing and electricity to a citizen for less than ten per cent of his or her income, a society that guaranteed work, that had pensions and benefits for retired people and yet something had gone wrong. I had no answer to the problem but it set me thinking. It wasn't that the night binges involved the majority of young people. But it did seem to release a pent-up frustration in quite a few. And the wearing of imported jeans, shoes or the drinking of Pepsi Cola had somehow become symbolic as acts of liberation.

I went to the Soviet Union again in the summer of 1989 and this visit only reconfirmed my earlier impression. I also managed this time to meet and talk to quite a few people, and what I gathered was that there was no dialogue between them and the government. There was no one listening to what they had to say. On the one hand, there were Communist party functionaries who thought that everything was fine, and on the other, there were people who felt the need for change, for more openness. In China, in June the same year, a student protest movement for more openness had also been crushed quite savagely. Why did any protest have to be seen as a threat to the system that, in its essence, should have encouraged debate, dialogue and change? Wasn't that the essence of Marxism? I then knew that all was not well in the peasants' and workers' paradise.

I write this to let you know that my faith in a world view was also shaken. As Baba had said, there was a rot that had set in and

there were no new ideas and innovations that could change things around. I had always believed that Marxism was only the first step to create a just and humane world and, through a constant interaction with people, it would grow and develop and renew itself. This, I believed, had to be a continuous process. What I saw in the Soviet Union was rigidity. Instead of reaching outward, the State had turned inwards. By the early 1990s, the Soviet Union would collapse into separate nations and later the countries of Eastern Europe would split away too.

That day, as I sat in the veranda with you and Baba, I was also going through my own turmoil. An entire edifice that I had built up in my mind had turned shaky and unstable. I had also lost a language and a world view with which to express myself. Was I also obsolete? And what I was seeing happening in my own country did not help either. So, I sat silently. I wanted to say things to you but I just couldn't.

Three months later you had passed away.

who were you, Ammi?

Who and what were you, Ammi? It has taken me years and years to figure out an answer to this question and I feel I still have a long way to go. And, in trying to unravel you, I have no choice but to unravel Baba too, because in so many ways both your stories were similar. And, perhaps, in telling your stories I can unravel myself too.

a shameless love affair

It was a shameless love affair and I can vouch for that. This was supposed to be India and the 'East' and all public expressions of affection between a man and a woman were just not acceptable. It was not our 'parampara'. It was not our 'culture'. The year was 1945 when I first noticed the signals. Quite a few people in the neighbourhood noticed these signals too. There were the neighbours in Block A of Fonseca Mansion. Then there were neighbours who lived in a building further down the road. There were even people on the street who wondered what these signals were all about. By 1950, as more and more people began settling in new apartment buildings, they saw these signals too. All of them passed the word on and it spread to other people. Soon there would be more people on more balconies of more distant apartment buildings observing the 'goings on'.

What they all saw was that whenever Baba left for work in the morning you would be standing at the corner window watching him depart. At the little post box, he would turn and wave and you would wave back too. He would walk on to the gulmohar and turn round and wave once more and then he would not be visible. You would stand at the window a while longer and then leave. The whole exercise would be repeated at around five-thirty in the evening when you would be at the window waiting for his return. Only this time there would be no waving as you watched him approach and then you would open the front door and let him in.

Later, when Baba began to write for films, this ritual would be broken only when Baba returned home by taxi or when a grateful film producer would have him dropped home in a big car.

Ammi, I had seen this ritual continue for almost twenty-five years till I left Bombay to go and work in Delhi. I also know that it carried on for another ten years till the day Baba would no longer leave for work because there were no more producers willing to listen to his stories or ask for his advice. Once in a while, he did go out to meet a few film people to 'check things out' and when he did so, you were at the window again.

Then there was another twist to the ritual.

It was the touching of hands at home. I think the first time I saw it was in 1955. It was a time when I knew Baba was going through a crisis in his professional life.

Baba's dilemma

Baba had sold a wonderful script to a producer after months of convincing him, and the film had been launched with great fanfare because it had a superstar acting in it. But there was a hitch. The producer had signed an actress for the heroine's role and the superstar wanted her removed. A case had been filed in court by the actress against the producer for breach of contract. The producer wanted the people employed by him to testify against her and support, what he called, a forged contract. Baba had refused to testify. I remember those times as Baba agonized over his decision because he knew the consequences of his action. The producer was furious. The tension in the house was palpable and all of us children knew what he had done. It went on for days. And then, one morning, 'the gesture' happened. I was in the hall and I glanced out of the window to see the two of you sitting alone in the veranda silently. Then I saw Baba stretch out his hand. And you quietly held it.

That was the first time I had witnessed it, but Talat, being

five years older, said she had seen it before. Now I must get on with my tale.

what I've heard

The details are sketchy but I was told that both Baba and you headed towards the city of Bombay in 1935 with just about eight hundred and eighty rupees that were saved over a period of two-and-a-half years. There were no jobs at the end of the journey and no fixed plans. It was only a stopover in Bhopal and it was the meeting up with your brother that better sense prevailed. Your brother asked a few awkward questions to which Baba had very few answers, and that is why you stayed behind in Bhopal till Baba could survey the city, manage to get some work, and then send for you.

How were the two of you heading into a city with no jobs in hand, no place to stay, no friends and no idea of anything? It was crazy!

Anyway, Baba arrived in the city in early 1936, stayed in a musafirkhana at Muhammad Ali Road, and confidentially began applying for a job. The first one he tried was the *Times of India*, but they had no vacancy for the post of assistant editor. Assistant editor? No trainee, no junior journalist, no junior anything for Baba. It had to be assistant editor or nothing. He got nothing. Baba was taken aback slightly. 'I thought I was qualified to be the editor,' he told me years later. He then tried the new Taj Mahal Hotel for the post of manager. He got nothing once again. Baba was getting slightly nervous now. He tried other newspapers, he even applied for jobs as a manager in some of the fine restaurants, as a teacher in Elphinstone College, but nothing worked. In three months he was back in Bhopal with no job but with a gushing admiration for the city. He told you all about it and your eyes lit up.

I know this because you told me so yourself. Baba told you of the magnificent Victoria Terminus Railway Station and Crawford Market. He had also told you about the great shipyards and docks and the architectural splendour of the Municipal Corporation and the General Post Office. He told you about the huge textile mills, oils, chemicals and paper mills and railway yards, where thousands upon thousands of people worked, about the impressive stone buildings with marble facades that housed offices, banks and great trading companies at Ballard Estate and Flora Fountain. He told you about the luxury hotels, great stores, restaurants and shops around Colaba Causeway and Kala Ghoda and also about the fine mansions and apartments where people lived. He told you about the gymkhanas and parks, about the libraries, museums and art galleries, about the wonderful sculptures and statues that could be seen at street corners, and about the numerous schools, colleges and hospitals. His favourite story was about a new road being built called Marine Drive that would have wonderful residential apartment buildings with a vast expanse of sea in front of them. 'One day we will live there,' he had said. Yes, this wonderful modern city was so different from anything he had ever seen.

And, most importantly, he also told you that this was a city that had no history. It was here that people came from all over the country to break free from their past and became what they really wanted to be.

'This is the future,' he had said. Then he added: 'Should I look for a job in Bhopal?'

'No,' was your answer. 'Don't give up.'

Baba was back in Bombay. He looked at the Appointments pages of the newspapers, applied for jobs once more with feeling, but nothing was working out. This was a tough city and he was desperate. It was now that he took up a contract for the loading and dispatch of coal from the railway yards at Sewree to destinations elsewhere.

What he was up to I will never know. But coal was his

business and years later when I asked him what it was all about, he had said it had something to do with the Tata Steel plant at Jamshedpur. As he slogged in those railway yards transporting all that coal to god knows where, he was making plans for both of you. And when he would return to visit you in Bhopal for two weeks every six months, he would tell you more stories about this great mercantile and manufacturing city. Your eyes would light up again. He would head back and you would wait and pray.

It seems after about one-and-a-half years of hauling coal, he almost gave up because what he was earning was not enough to cover the cost of his living in the city and paying for your expenses in Bhopal. You were eating into your savings and I was also told that it was at this time that your family offered to help out and Baba refused to accept it. (God, he really was a stubborn man!) But it also seems that he faltered a bit now. He almost took a teaching job in a school in Bhopal, but just before doing so, he asked you a question.

'Should I do it?'

It seems you faltered a bit too and then:

'Don't give up,' was your answer once again.

Baba returned to Bombay, and after a week, he met a man. It was Mr Jacobi, a sharp businessman from Baghdad.

As Baba would say: 'It was destiny.'

I don't know how Baba met Mr Jacobi but it seems they liked each other. Mr Jacobi thought that Baba was cut out for far better things than spending time sweating it out at the railway yards at Sewree. So he offered him another kind of job. It was a job of selling locks which would require good talking skills. Baba accepted it with amazing speed and together they made quite a team.

A great war was looming around the corner and in a year's time, Baba, Mr Jacobi and their lock business began cleaning up the city. Besides the business, they would discuss literature and poetry and history. Mr Jacobi loved history and could trace his roots all

the way back to the Spanish Inquisition of 1482 which was when his family fled Spain and found refuge in the Ottoman Empire.

With just two months behind him in the lock business, Baba felt confident enough to escort you to the city that had no history. I believe it was in mid-1938 that you arrived at Victoria Terminus Station and I was told that, on stepping down from your compartment on to the platform, you turned to look around. And then you turned around once more. And once more.

'Ya Allah!' you said in amazement.

It would amaze anyone Ammi, because you were standing on a platform of a train terminus that was the pride of the British Empire. In fact it was built to inspire awe and respect and you even lifted your veil for a few seconds to get a better look. Then you smiled.

You smiled.

It seems to me that both of you had some kind of secret plan and the city of Bombay was an integral part of that plan. I am almost sure of it and yet I can't quite figure it out. The stories that I've heard don't lead to a very clear picture, but hidden in them was the remarkable journey of two people. Even as I write about those times now I feel nostalgic. Why I should feel nostalgic I do not know because the journey wasn't mine; yet I feel so much a part of it.

When you first arrived in Bombay, from your rented apartment at Cuffe Parade, you and Baba would go to those great ocean liners and huge cargo ships that sailed past the Gateway of India. You would stand there for hours watching them. You told me how you were struck by the continuous movement in the city. Trains, buses and tramcars. There were private cars and horse carriages too. You were amazed to see so many people rushing

around to work in factories, mills, ships, markets, hospitals, schools, offices, and banks. In a few months' time Baba was earning a fair amount of money and, so often after a day's work, both of you would go and see films in those magnificent cinema halls: Eros, New Empire, Metro and Regal. They were all English films and Baba would translate the dialogue for you. Both of you would walk on the promenade in front of the Taj Mahal Hotel and discuss plans. It seems Baba and you were discussing a lot of plans.

The first few months also revealed something else to you.

You got a glimpse of the thousands of working women in the city. There were secretaries who wore dresses and skirts. There were fisherwomen who sold their catch near the dockyards. There were women in saris, who worked in the textile mills. You saw hundreds of schoolteachers, nurses and even the occasional doctors. You were also amazed by the freedom that all of them had. How they mingled in the crowds, how they laughed and talked and walked.

You told me you had been in the city for just about four months when it played its trick on you. You were emerging from the hall of the Eros theatre and were about to wear your burqa in the foyer when Baba popped the question to you.

'Begum, do you really want to wear it?'

You told me you paused for a moment, and then you shook your head. And that was that. The rest, as they say, is history.

the tale of the veil that disappeared

I am trying to imagine that moment. The year was 1938 and you had been wearing a burqa ever since you were thirteen years old. What went through your mind that made you decide that you were not going to wear it anymore? It was such an incredible decision. In a way I believe that this particular moment would be

fixed forever in your mind. Am I right? What did Baba do or say when you shook your head? I believe he smiled. What did you do with the burqa that was in your hands? I was told that you folded it and put it around your arm and walked home with Baba. What did you feel when you walked home? There must have been hundreds of people who passed you by on the streets that evening and who, perhaps, even looked at you. Did you look back at them? Or, did you look down at the road as you walked? Later, you folded the burqa and put it away in a trunk at home, almost saying to the world and, perhaps, to yourself too, that a chapter was closed. You then joined Baba at the dining table and smiled. I was told that Baba looked at you and smiled too.

It was perhaps the quietest revolution ever because it seems you and Baba never talked about your decision again. And here I am, so many years later, still wondering about a story that should have made the headlines, that should have been trumpeted from rooftops, but was instead silently hushed up in a rented apartment on Cuffe Parade. I am not suggesting that you had turned into a revolutionary because I do know you were a devout Muslim all your life and you even prayed five times a day. But I still wonder.

What I also know is that in a year's time in the city, the two of you became quite a couple about town. Baba bought for himself a few suits, silk shirts, ties and shoes and for his Begum there were silk saris with matching blouses and sandals with heels. He even bought her several pieces of jewellery. They would often dine out in fine restaurants, see films in grand cinema theatres and they would also occasionally visit the race track to see the horses run, though they never gambled.

Now, I am trying to imagine both of you as you discovered this city that had no real history. It must have been exhilarating. Immigrants from all corners of India had come here looking for work. They were peasants and labourers and artisans. So many of

them had come to escape wars, droughts or famines in their native lands, they had come to escape the social taboos in their villages and town while many were just adventurers with dreams in their hearts. They would, over time, become the working class of the city. Along with them came the traders, merchants and financiers, who always closely followed the upheavals of history and placed their bets on the winning side. For generations they had survived and thrived on making the right choices and on the patronage of ruling dynasties. This time they knew which side won and had won convincingly.

Then there were the industrialists who owned textile mills, steel plants, shipbuilding yards, paper, oil, dyes and chemical mills, leather and machine tool factories and railway workshops. To fill the gap in the middle of the social spectrum were the professionals who included doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, engineers, architects, businessmen, hoteliers, restaurateurs, bankers, shopkeepers, clerks and journalists. And to entertain this vast assortment of people were playwrights, writers, painters, actors, singers, poets, musicians, magicians, street performers and filmmakers. To be democratic I have to include the prostitutes and dancing girls in this category too. Finally, I must not forget the thieves, pimps, hoodlums, pickpockets, gamblers and racketeers. And to keep an eye on them was the police force. Though, very often, the police force would be part of the same rackets.

All these people contributed to build a city that had no history.

This is where Baba and his Begum found themselves and they loved it. In 1940, because of the Second World War and the rumour of a possible submarine or air attack, they, along with their daughter Talat, moved from the seafront to the interiors of the city. It was a spacious apartment in a building called Fonseca Mansion in Mahim. The apartment building was carefully selected, it was cosmopolitan and the people who lived there came from all parts of the country. To make sure that his wife did not have to spend too much time in the kitchen, Baba hired a cook. For

Talat who was born in 1939 and Aziz who was born in 1941 there was a maid to look after them. Yes, those were fine times and it seemed to me that Baba had a point to prove to his wife. He was going to give her all the luxuries of the world. But it wasn't to be. The lock business lasted for four-and-a-half years and by 1943, the year I was born, it folded up and Mr Jacobi left India to seek his fortunes elsewhere. Baba was now heir to a collapsed coal-and-lock business.

Now comes the part I love the most but which also leaves me in despair. I call it the Quixotian joint enterprise. It was the most silly and yet delightfully adventurous journey that both of you took. I say both of you because what followed from the collapse of the lock business amply reveals your complicity.

the tale of the joint enterprise

Baba invested all his savings from the lock trade into a manufacturing enterprise. He was going to be a manufacturer, not a dead lock salesman.

The plan did have a stroke of genius in it. The war had led to shortages in quite a few products and some were just not available. One of them was Golden Syrup. It was sugar-based treacle that had proved very popular in earlier times. Another was an aerated drink that had not yet come to India, but was very popular in America. It was called Coca Cola. So Baba turned to his 'Head of Research and Development'.

'Do you think we can make this cola?'

'Of course,' was the confident answer.

'Do you think we can match the Golden Syrup?'

'Yes we can,' was the confident answer once again.

The 'Head of R&D', of course, was you Ammi.

(A thought crosses my mind. Would you have been the first woman head of R&D in India? In the world?)

So Baba, with this kind of an enthusiastic and encouraging response, decided to manufacture the syrup and a similar kind of cola. He would call the cola 7Up because it sounded modern and also because he thought the American company, that had a similar name for another product, would never find out. For good measure, Baba also decided to manufacture another soft drink that would have an orange flavour. He would call it Sevilla Orange, named after the famous city of Moorish origins in Spain. He bought a small factory, brought in the machines for assembly-line production, a refrigeration unit and called the whole enterprise 'The Sevilla/7Up Factory'.

the 'head of R&D' gets down to
developing the products

Talat would tell me later how you would create the 'test' products in our kitchen. You had a juicer and a mixer in which you checked out the ingredients and the quantities. Once you were satisfied you would then have them replicated proportionately in the factory. Talat even told me how, when the Golden Syrup was about to be readied for the assembly line, all the workers would have to leave the rooms so that you could add your secret ingredient to it. It was salt. And it was that little addition of salt that made your Golden Syrup so popular. Sevilla Orange, 7Up Cola and Golden Syrup were now ready to be consumed in the suburbs of Mahim, Dadar, Matunga and Bandra.

Ammi, I have a few questions to ask you at this point. On what basis did you and Baba go in for the manufacture of these products? What was the research that was done and what was the marketing strategy? How did you see the future for these products? What was the competition and how would it be tackled? What was your pricing policy? Was there any contingency plan or fund? Did

you have any strategy at all? The most amazing part of it all was that the 'Research and Development' laboratory was a small kitchen at 3A Fonseca Mansion, Mahim, Bombay—16! I can't believe it.

What were the two of you up to? Did Baba really believe that he could be a great entrepreneur? Did you believe he could become one? This was a city of hardheaded traders, merchants, financiers, businessmen and industrialists. They had learnt how to strike deals, circumvent rules or create new ones, they knew how to collaborate with, or undercut and destroy the competition, seek favours from political rulers and grab any opportunity for profit. They had learnt all this from their fathers, grandfathers and even their great grandfathers. It was in their DNA.

Let me give you an example of the 'skill' of the business mind. Remember the rumour of the impending naval or air attack on the city of Bombay in 1940? Now, a sharp entrepreneur would have smiled and seized the opportunity! As people fled from their shoreline homes on Marine Drive and Cuffe Parade and headed for the interiors of the city, he would have entered the scene. He would have transformed fear into an economic opportunity and bought up their properties for a song, and within four years resold them to make a killing. If he waited a little longer he would make a fortune. Two smart people actually did that.

Fortunes are made by the few who remain steadfast in times of panic and rumours. It is also possible that the few who remain steadfast are the ones who create the rumours and panic. Who knows?

Anyway, I must get back to your joint enterprises. I believe it was an act of faith and both of you hoped and prayed it would work. It did for almost four years. The products sold reasonably well and the investment made in the factory and equipment was almost recovered. The family was on a good wicket and the future looked bright. Then the Second World War got over and soon afterwards Coca Cola entered the market. The original Golden

Syrup returned to the shop shelves. It was tough luck. By the end of 1948 your business was tottering, and by the beginning of 1950 it had shut down. The machinery and premises had to be sold to pay off debts and the wages of the workers.

(Another thought crosses my mind. This is a close-to-home example of a multinational corporation wiping out a small-scale business.)

But even as the Sevilla and 7Up Factory was pulling down its shutters, there was one final hurrah. It came in the shape of toffees and kulfis. Between 1949 and 1950, the best toffees and kulfis in the world were made at Fonseca Mansion. The toffees were rolled off our kitchen table, wrapped in silver paper and were christened 'Romeo and Juliet toffees'. And the Three Star Kulfis were made in the national colours of a newly independent India: orange, white and green. It was the last throw of the dice and they were the most delicious kulfis in the world. I can vouch for that because I tasted them. They were made from condensed milk, almonds, sugar and cashew nuts, and with a lot of skill and a lot of prayer. It didn't quite work out but what I can definitely say is that both Baba and you went out in style. And the family was broke.

The year was 1950 and Baba would soon become a film writer.

what I actually saw and heard

What follows next are some of my memories of you and Baba at Fonseca Mansion where I was born, grew up and left only after I got married.

Let me start with Talat. Both Aziz and I always felt that Baba was much more lenient and tolerant towards her than he was

with us. (You, we both believed, were more even-handed.) But what is still surprising are the choices you made for her and what you encouraged her to do. For instance, when it came to her education, you chose to enrol her in a co-educational school. It had boys and girls, all the way to the senior classes and was considered a very modern school. Later we would be sent there too. I wonder who made that choice. Was it both you and Baba? Or was it Baba alone?

The reason I ask this is because there was a relatively good all-girls' school in Mahim. And a lot of Talat's friends, living at Fonseca Mansion and in the neighbourhood, attended it. So why a co-ed school? It would be easy to dismiss the question today, but the choice was made in 1943. But having made the choice I think you also had a lot of apprehensions. And that is why you made sure Talat learnt Urdu at home and you taught her to cook and embroider too. It was not just cooking and sewing that was emphasized. It was how she walked, talked and how she sat that was also carefully supervised by you. It was in the grand tradition of 'tehzeeb' or etiquette. I remember the short but sharp reprimands when she was about twelve years old.

'Talat, sit properly!'

'Talat, watch your dupatta, don't let it slip off your shoulder!'

'Talat, don't bare your teeth when you laugh.'

Going to a 'modern' school was fine, but I think you were also making sure that she didn't step too far out of line. Nevertheless, a minor crisis did occur when Talat, at the age of twelve, began humming and singing the English songs that she had been hearing on the popular programme Binaca Hit Parade on the radio. You heard her and that is why she was also introduced to Indian classical music to balance things out. For two years Gyaniji, our wonderful family friend, gave her singing lessons, while you sat by and nodded approvingly, as he slipped in large doses of 'culture' and 'values'.

'Our music is thousands of years old . . . thousands of years,' he would say.

You would nod and Gyaniji would continue.

'Not like the cheap English songs on the radio. All these nonsense words . . . like kissing and . . . dancing . . . and baby and all that.'

You would nod again.

'We have tradition. Some of these English songs are shameless.'

You would nod again.

And when the time came for Talat to join college, it wasn't just any college she was sent to. It was one that had the reputation of being the most liberal in the city. It was here that she developed her love for the theatre. I remember how both you and Baba would go to see her perform at the inter-collegiate competitions. There she was on stage, while both of you sat proudly in the auditorium. She was good Ammi, very good. And she kept winning prizes. It was only when her unconventional friends from the theatre group began to visit our home that you turned slightly anxious. When they began to come regularly, I think your anxiety grew. And when you noticed the peroxide in her hair, I know you got a shock.

a tale of peroxide

I was there in the room when it happened. You saw that streak of reddish brown in her black hair as she sat in front of the mirror in our home. You walked up to her and examined the streak. Talat looked nervously at you. Then you touched it.

'What is this?'

'Ammi, it's a little colour.'

'I know that. But why is it in your hair?'

'Ammi, a lot of girls in college have it.'

'It looks cheap and vulgar. Can it be removed?'

'Yes, but it will take a while.'

'I don't care how long it takes, remove it.'

But Talat was not going to remove it. She used the oldest ploy

in the world that daughters resort to. She went to her father who was sitting in the veranda for support and you followed her. I followed too because I was curious to find out what would happen now. The debate that followed was hilarious.

'Begum, it's only a little colour.'

'It looks so cheap.'

'I think it looks quite nice.'

'Nice? You find it nice? Ya Allah!'

'All right, it doesn't look very nice. But she seems to like it.'

'So?'

'I have nothing more to say.'

You thought that over for a moment and then you just shook your head.

'I think it's vulgar.'

'Do I have to remove it?' asked Talat.

'You are old enough to decide,' you said and walked away.

The year was 1957. Talat remained in the peroxide mode for a year and then grew out of it.

barriers are broken

I remember the time you decided to play badminton with the Anglo-Indian ladies in the neighbourhood. It had taken a week of planning and you had set up a game with Mrs Noguer, Mrs Diefholtz and Mrs Griffiths. I was surprised because most of the other married women at Fonseca Mansion didn't quite know what to make of them. They wore skirts and dresses on weekdays as they went to work. On Sundays they wore shorts. On weekends they went to the dances at the Railway Gymkhana at Byculla or a gymkhana in Parel and the other women looked on in wonder. The Anglo-Indian didn't quite know what to make of these women either. So what really existed was a 'live and let live' situation, with everyone trying to be polite to each other. It boiled down to a nod here, a 'good afternoon' there, a smile wherever.

But, after the first session, the games of badminton continued.

It was strange watching the four of you play every evening on weekdays and early in the morning on Sundays. They were dressed in skirts and shorts and you were in your sari. At first, the other women of Fonseca Mansion watched curiously, and then one day, Mrs Bulchandani joined in. So did Mrs Gracias. And then it was Ms Soman, Mrs Sharma and Mrs Sanglikar. In a year's time several others, including children began to play and the badminton club began to flourish. What used to be invisible walls of 'us and them' began to crumble.

'It was out!'

'No, in it was!'

'Mrs Mirza. I distinctly saw the shuttle land out. Aap dekha nahin?'

'Maine dekha. *Distinctly* in! I saw.'

'I think we need a referee.'

'What referee? I am referee.'

In all this confusion there would be laughter and your friendships grew. Unfortunately, by 1960 most of the Anglo-Indians had migrated to England or Australia or New Zealand and it was strange watching them leave a land that their fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers had called home.

the tale of the handyman

'Let's call the plumber!' Baba would shout when the flush tank in the bathroom didn't work. 'Let's call the electrician!' we would yell when a socket blew a fuse. And there you would appear with your handy wooden toolbox. It had a hammer, pliers, screwdrivers, nails, coppers, steel and aluminium wire, a small saw, scissors, washers, a file and needle and thread. It even had sticking tape. Where did you learn how to fix a fuse or a flush tank, or repair and re-repair the juicer, the toaster and even the electric iron? But there you were, with your kit, ready to fix what needed to be fixed. At one level I know we couldn't really have afforded a plumber or electrician, or a new electrical appliance, but at another I also knew

that what could be repaired at home and made functional once again was something you firmly believed in. And you and Baba also made repairing look like a lot of fun. You would be up on a ladder checking the fuse box and Baba would be standing below next to the toolkit.

'Pass me the wire.'

'Yes, sir.' Baba would say and wink at us as he selected a wire.

'Is it this one, sir?'

'No, it's too thick.'

'Then which one?'

'The copper one.'

'Sorry for the delay, huzoor, here's a copper wire coming up!'

And we would all laugh.

After you passed away, I happened to visit the storeroom of our apartment at Fonseca Mansion. Lying in a dark corner was your toolkit, the multi-repaired electric iron, toaster and juicer. And so was the sewing machine that you had since 1933. I stared at it and smiled.

a home of small pleasures

'Soon you will see a great miracle,' you whispered as we children watched the little green caterpillars munch away on the leaves you fed them. You had made them a home from an empty shoebox, punctured with little holes on top for ventilation. Sure enough, in a matter of a few days, the caterpillars began to cocoon themselves and we looked on astonished. 'Is this the miracle?' I asked. 'No,' you said, 'wait and watch.' And then we waited and watched through the holes on top of the box. We waited for days and the suspense was killing. 'When will the miracle happen?' asked Aziz who was six years old. 'Be patient. It can happen any day now.' And then the caterpillars emerged from their cocoons as butterflies and you set them free. I still remember the first time that

happened and I couldn't believe it. 'How did it happen. Ammi?' I asked. You smiled and said it was a miracle.

We watched caterpillars become butterflies for two years in a row. We called in our friends to watch too. And it wasn't just butterflies we had in our home. There were sixteen pigeons and three cats that stayed with us for years. How the cats were kept away from the pigeons, I'll never know. We had a crow with a broken wing that was taken in for protection, a baby monkey and a gluttonous squirrel Raja who ate so much that finally his belly touched the floor. How he survived the cats was also a mystery, but when his belly touched the floor, you, Ammi, were the one who diagnosed his disease.

'He needs a wife,' you had said.

Baba put his foot down and said 'no'. Raja died soon after, a fat, lonely bachelor. Baba, to compensate for the loss, brought home a pair of baby rabbits and we were happy once again. Unfortunately, since the cats couldn't get at the pigeons or Raja, they got at the rabbits. It was a sad end for the rabbits and the cats got a thrashing. And finally I must not forget Chishti and Mishti, the two sparrows that you had invited every morning to have breakfast with us. Before they arrived, the cats would be locked up in another room so that the sparrows could move freely around the breakfast table and be fed on the crumbs that everybody had kept ready. After breakfast and a drink of water from their tiny special bowl, they would fly away and the cats would be let out once again.

a home of surprises

Anyone visiting us at mealtimes, and there were quite a few who did, would believe that this was a home of plenty. I don't know how you managed it but the spread on our dining table was always surprisingly generous. The nicest part was that mealtimes, where all of us had to be at the table, were also times for conversation and camaraderie and laughter, and occasionally, the surprise.

'Talat . . . can you please . . . pass me . . . the . . . kofta curry?'

We would look at you in wonder because you had spoken the sentence in English and then you would nonchalantly add:

'I hope I am not . . . putting you . . . to any in . . . con . . . vee . . . nience.'

We would burst out laughing and Baba would smile too as you would look at all of us smugly 'English is easy language.'

You had waited for the moment, caught us unawares and then you struck. I also have a strong suspicion that you had practised those sentences thoroughly before in the kitchen, but unfortunately I have no proof.

'I hope I am not putting you to any in . . . con . . . vee . . . nience.' Come on, Ammi!

There were times though when we would notice that the levels of food in the bowls were suspiciously lower and it would be at those times that all of us would be far less talkative. It was a kind of reality check and all of us knew it. But coming back to the meals in our house, we ate in style. Maybe it was that one single act of illusion, another piece of magic, that kept us in high spirits, and I am so grateful for that. And even today, I still carry out your ritual of making sure that the first light switched on in the evening in our home is the one over the dining table.

'That's what life is all about,' you had always said.

and once a home of sadness

It must have been around 1954 when it happened. All of us children were at home because of our school holidays when a letter arrived addressed to you. You quietly read it. You passed it on to Baba and went to your room and shut the door. Baba told us that your father had died and the letter from an uncle had conveyed the news. All I remember was that from that moment onwards, a silence descended into our home that lasted for four days. The meals were still cooked, the washing and ironing still done, the beds still made, but the conversations had come to a standstill. It

lasted for four days and for those four days you shut yourself up in your room every afternoon, and lay on your bed with a photograph of your father in your arms.

For those four days we wandered around the house not knowing what to say or do. I still remember Baba trying to cheer us up with jokes, and then shaking his head, lapsing into silence. I remember Talat taking charge and supervising the cooking and cleaning. I remember Aziz trying to help out in the kitchen. I remember myself standing at the door of your room in the afternoons and wanting to enter and yet not doing so. And then on the fourth afternoon you emerged from your room and saw all of us sitting in the veranda. We all looked at you and then you smiled as we rushed into your arms and hugged you. Baba looked on and smiled.

It was such a relief. I know you mourned for your father for much longer, but you also realized that in those four days your home had become a shadow of itself, and you needed to set it right. Your mourning could be done in private.

Do I need to recall these memories? I don't know. But what I do know is those times of butterflies and cats and pigeons and sparrows, and the conversations and laugher during mealtimes helped us to forget other things that were also happening in our home, the slow and steady pawning of your gold jewellery: necklaces, bangles, rings, the occasional redemption of a piece only for it to be pawned again, the selling off of the fancy suits, shirts and silk saris. Over a ten-year period, the mounting costs of school and college fees and the personal expenses of growing children, the household and other expenses had taken their toll.

the day I became a Muslim

It was in 1952 and it was Eid. As was your usual practice you prepared the bowls of sheer korma that you had made at home.

Along with the bowls you included plates of mithai that you had bought. The bowls and plates were put on trays that were covered in embroidered malmal cloth and sent to our neighbours. This was done every year but that year something strange happened. Our neighbour next door came back with the bowl of sheer korma looking embarrassed and he apologized profusely. He told Baba that his mother from Punjab was visiting and she would not touch anything that was made in a Muslim's house. And, since she was there, the rest of the family couldn't eat it either.

'What about the mithai?' Baba asked.

The neighbour still embarrassed, tried to explain that since the mithai was bought from a Hindu shop his mother would accept it. Baba listened silently as the man pleaded his case.

'She is seventy years old, please forgive her.'

Baba didn't say a word. He took the tray back and gave it to you. You took the bowl of sheer korma and put it away. Talat was furious.

'Why didn't they throw it in the sink and pretend they'd eaten it?'

'Let's get the mithai back,' said Aziz angrily.

You had said nothing. It was later that I asked you about the incident.

'Why did she refuse it, Ammi?'

'I don't know.'

'She said she will not eat anything made in our house.'

You nodded and kept silent.

'Are you feeling bad about it?'

'I am.'

'I think she is a stupid old woman.'

'Saddu, people don't want to be rude. She and her family have come from Pakistan. I don't know what happened to them there and that could be a reason. Could it not?'

It could have been a reason. I knew the partition of India had led to terrible acts of mass violence and the old lady may have been a witness of those times. But thee is another reason for recalling this incident, which occurred when I was perhaps just nine years

old. For the first time in my life the fact that we were Muslims had been underlined. And maybe something else was defined too. Was it hate? Or revulsion at 'eating food made by hands that were unclean and impure?' Whatever the rationale, it was used to define an entire community. It happened such a long time ago but I still remember the feeling of confusion, a peculiar emptiness inside and anger.

'Wah!' said Mr Agarwal.

'Wah!' said Mr Sharma.

'Wah!' said Gyaniji.

'Wah!' said Baba.

'Wah!' said Mr Akhtar-ul-Imam.

And then there was the occasional 'Wah!' from you.

The sound of that word always intrigued me. It wasn't just the word but also the action that preceded it. The shutting of the eyes, the slow shaking of the head before the word was uttered. Ever since I was six years old and till I was about ten, I would occasionally sit with you and Baba as our neighbours and friends would gather in the veranda of our home for an evening of chit-chat. The conversation would be wide-ranging, from politics to literature and films, but inevitably one of them would recite an Urdu couplet to emphasize a point, which would be followed by a counterpunch couplet and then the 'wahs' of appreciation would start. I would wait for that moment. From then on there would be a kind of competition with each one trying to out-quote the other, and I would watch and hope Baba would win. I couldn't really follow the poetry but I loved those moments of laughter and camaraderie. It went on for years and you would be in the midst of it all—a woman in the midst of men.

A woman in the midst of men. This brings me to the other reason for recalling those evenings.

Just below our house and on the steps of the entrance to our

block sat other married women of Fonseca Mansion. Sometimes there would be seven or eight of them and sometimes about four or five. They would gather every evening at around six-thirty and quietly talk to each other till about eight. Then they would head back to their homes and serve dinner to their husbands and children. You never joined them on those steps Ammi, not once. I always wondered why. I got an answer from you in 1968.

'I did not give up the burqa a long while ago to sit on those steps and moan and groan about my problems.'

'Why did you give it up?'

'I don't know, but definitely not for that.'

I believe you, Ammi. It was definitely not for that. I believe that you gave up the burqa to be able to participate in journeys and not be a spectator. I also know that when your 'manufacturing phase' collapsed it was you who convinced Baba to write for films. Baba finally relented because he had run out of other ideas and money. And when Baba did begin to write, another journey began. It was you who would be the first to listen to his ideas and make your comments. Then he would further develop it into a story. By 1960 Baba was a famous filmwriter though he did have a reputation for not being 'open to ideas and change'. It was incredible. Baba was a famous filmwriter who didn't get much work. But he wrote his stories anyway, whether they got sold or not. What very few people knew was your role in the writing of these stories. You did it for thirty-five years. In fact both of you went on with it even when the producers and directors had stopped calling years ago. By the early 1970s the calls got fewer and by the end of the decade they had stopped. I remember those times when I would drop by for a chat and Baba would be ready by ten in the morning, pen and paper in hand, and you would join him by eleven after completing the cooking. The help in the kitchen had gone years ago and there was only Asha who would come twice a week to do the sweeping and scrubbing.

I would observe both of you as you settled down for the day's

work. I know it mattered to both of you that there was no producer waiting in the wings, but there was something else that I think you also realized: this was what Baba was really cut out for and so were you. Both of you could create stories and dreams. The only problem in this journey was that Baba had an unusual faith in his stories and that is why he protected them so obstinately. So many of his stories were almost sold but rejected at the last minute. That is also the reason why the times of plenty in our home were not too often and financial uncertainty constantly lurked around the corner. The price of this uncertainty was borne by you because you had a home to run and Baba knew this too. Maybe those were also the times when he stretched out his hand to you and you held it.

a quotable quote

'People with small minds,' Baba had said. The words would ring in my mind some time later.



Another journey begins when a saffron lady shrieks: 'Just one more push.'

a shriek that brought the house down

It was on the sixth of December 1992. The lady in saffron heard the structure groan and shudder. Then she screamed: 'Just one more push.' The hordes gave it one more push and brought down the medieval mosque. The hordes were led by leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party who, as you know, had started the movement for its destruction several years earlier. It all ended when the mosque tottered and fell down in a heap, crushing a couple of people in the demolition squad. There were thousands of policemen who stood by and watched. There were hundreds of journalists too who witnessed the event. It must have been some scream.

I remember seeing the images as they were televised across India and around the world. I remember the numbness in my mind as I saw the young marauders dancing in euphoria over the rubble where the mosque once stood.

What followed from here on was a strange tableau. Muslim mobs, as if on cue, began to protest and attack and burn government property, especially in the city of Bombay. The scale and violence of the protests caught the administration by surprise, and the police resorted to firing. Quite a few people were killed. The rioting stopped. The anger turned quiet and sullen. Then an eerie calm settled across the land as the nation tried to come to terms with what had happened. The calm was most palpable in Bombay. Then slowly, very slowly, whispers began in the city about 'teaching these Muslim bastards a lesson'. Nobody knows how the rumours started, but across the city people waited for 'the lesson' to begin. I couldn't figure out what was the lesson that the

Muslims had to be taught. They had protested against the destruction of the mosque and their anger had been focused on government property. The police had opened fire and killed quite a few of them. They had attacked the police in retaliation and some more of them were killed. And yet there were these rumours floating around the city. I remember, a friend of mine, Abha, who lives in the suburbs, ringing me up on the twenty-ninth of December 1992 and warning me about stepping out of my house.

'Why?' I asked.

'I don't know,' she replied. 'I'm hearing all kinds of crazy rumours. They say something is going to start in the first week of January. Please be careful.'

I had heard these rumours too. In fact most of the citizens seemed to be aware of an impending onslaught and the city waited with bated breath for the action to begin. It was crazy, Ammi. If ordinary citizens were aware of what was going to happen, wouldn't the police and the administration have been aware of it too? What would be the flashpoint that would start the orgy?

It was conveniently provided with the death of two people in a slum in early January 1993. The blame was hurriedly put on Muslims without a real inquiry, and from then on right through up to about the middle of February, the killing of Muslims continued. Their shops and businesses were looted and burnt to the ground. For more than a month the city screamed in agony as the police and the administration watched. People were burnt alive, tossed from bridges on to railway lines, and killed just for the fun of it. The image of an old man lying sprawled on the road with his bicycle lying a few feet away still haunts me. He was a milkseller who was trying desperately to escape a mob that was chasing him. The mob caught up with him, lynched him and burnt his bicycle.

'Twas a famous victory.

Added to all this was the bizarre twist of removing the nameplates in the foyers of residential buildings of all the Muslim tenants who happened to be living in cosmopolitan cooperative

housing societies, as the mobs began to do a thorough house-to-house search for potential victims. It was another case of removal of identities. In all this I also remember those phone calls in the night from childhood friend Shashi Navalkar.

'I'm so sorry, Saeed, I'm so sorry,' he said. 'When will this madness end?'

And then, as if on cue again, the killing stopped. A couple of thousand people had been slaughtered. No one was really arrested for the carnage.

Another eerie calm settled across the city and once again the rumours started about an impending Muslim backlash. 'They will come in from the sea,' it was whispered. 'They are arming themselves,' it was added.

Night-time vigils were held across the city to thwart the danger. Nothing happened. By the first week of March 1993, the city breathed a sigh of relief. The danger was over, the Muslims had been taught a lesson and there was no backlash.

In the middle of March 1993, the bomb blasts occurred. There were several of them at strategic points in the city and the effects were devastating. Innocent people were blown up near the Stock Exchange, near the Air India building, at the Passport Office at Worli. The mangled buildings, buses, cars and officers were testimony to the extent of the damage done. Bodies of people, limbs, heads and various parts of the human anatomy were strewn across vast stretches of land in the city. It was grotesque. Hundreds of innocent people died. The backlash had occurred. In a lightning swift move, the police arrested hundreds of people in the city.

How can one explain all these deaths and this madness? How can one explain that all this happened because of a dispute

about the location of a mosque and a temple? And Baba was right. The Bharatiya Janata Party grew into a formidable force in India. It grew from a party of nothing to a party of plenty. It was the new hope for a large number of people in India for traders, businessmen, priests and a burgeoning middle class. The party had one more claim to fame; it had fine-tuned the rhetoric of hate. On the streets and for the poor the rhetoric was crude and vicious. For the middle classes it was wrapped in frenzied religiosity. In upper class salons it distorted history to claim legitimacy. All three levels seem to have worked.

I must make a digression here. Why does perceived historical past suddenly become so important to a modern State? Does it give the State some kind of identity? And if yes, what kind of identity is it?

I am absolutely sure that the Mughal emperor Babar did quite a bit of temple-bashing in his day. At one level, he had his eye on the riches of India and at another, he had the mindset of a conquering zealot. But then so did all the rulers of those times. Hindu rulers did destroy Jain temples and Buddhist monasteries and I am sure Buddhist rulers did the same to the Hindu and Jain temples. The Christians built their churches on the religious sites of the people they conquered. Halagu destroyed the Grand Mosque of Baghdad and quite a few other mosques on his way from the steppes of Mongolia to the Caliphate in Mesopotamia. It was the method an ascending power always used to stamp its authority on the vanquished.

What amazed me about this movement in India was that an event which, perhaps, occurred about five hundred years ago, could be used to garner such support and create such a frenzied environment. That so many people could believe that a nation's honour had been restored by the levelling of a medieval mosque. The man who started the movement would become the deputy

prime minister of India. His cohort and brother-in-arms would become the prime minister. This prime minister would also try to pass off as a poet and statesman. And once he did become prime minister, a sizeable number of writers, journalists, newspaper editors, television talk-show hosts, artists and intellectuals began to believe he had these qualities too.

How low had we sunk as a country?

I felt sick, I had never been a practising Muslim and I know that my emotions had nothing to do with the fact that I had been born one. But that one act of destruction shook me. I was perhaps seeing the future and I did not quite like what I was seeing. I remember sitting at your grave on the night of the third anniversary of your death, in February 1993.

'This city doesn't deserve you, Ammi,' I had whispered.

I wanted to scream and tell the world what you represented. I wanted to tell the world that here was a woman who had celebrated the Muslim Eid, Hindu Diwali and Christian Christmas with equal passion, who had prohibited the cooking of both pork and beef in the house so that no religion would be offended, who had accepted the marriage of a daughter and a son to Hindu and of another son to a Christian. And she hadn't done these things to prove a point, she had done it because that was the way she was. That was the way she was. Why did she have to say, 'Where do they want us to go?' Who was 'they'? Did 'they' have more of a claim to her land than she did?

And yet, even in these scoundrel times. I did see hope. Hundreds of thousands of citizens in the city of Bombay and across the country protested against what had happened. They formed committees to help those who had suffered in the violence, with food, money, clothes and shelter. Let me tell you a short tale of one man who stood up against all odds and was counted in this time of despair and shock.

He was a judge of the Bombay High Court and was known as Justice Srikrishna. The government had instituted an inquiry into the riots and Justice Srikrishna was put in charge to head the inquiry. Here was a man who was deeply religious, who prayed at a temple every day, put in charge of an inquiry that would, in all probability, lead him to indict people who claimed to be his co-religionists and organizations that claimed to be defending his faith. The man did his job despite the manufactured legal delays, despite the emotional and frenzied environment, despite the political pressures to be lenient or look the other way, and finally produced a report that laid the blame squarely where it belonged: at the door of those political parties, people and organizations that had broken the law and had to be charged for the horrendous crimes they had committed. The fact that the conclusions of the report have not been implemented till today in another matter.

I write about Justice Srikrishna for another reason too. I try to imagine another judge, a Christian, Muslim, Sikh or Jew, in the same predicament as Justice Srikrishna where the defendants were co-religionists. What would he have done? Would he also have stood up and been counted? I also believe that Justice Srikrishna did what he did because he was a deeply spiritual man, way beyond the blinkered fanatics who claimed to be followers of his religion and his faith. He was a civilized man.

It was at this point of time, after the demolition and the events that followed, that I decided to travel and, hopefully, regain my composure, and try and understand my country and the world once again. Before doing so, I made my last film which was based on the events of that fateful day in December 1992. I dedicated the film to you and called it Naseem. It is the story of a relationship between a grandfather and granddaughter set in those times just before the levelling of the mosque. I based the relationship between

my two characters loosely on what existed between Baba and Reima, Talat's daughter. I haven't made a film since. I did try once and almost started making it, till my producer suggested I make a few changes in the script to add more drama to the narrative. I lost interest and quietly walked away. Maybe some day I will make films once again but right now travelling, meeting and talking to people gives me a lot of comfort.

I have travelled to West Asia and Iran, Europe, Central Asia, the United States and Canada, and most, importantly, I have travelled the length and breadth of India several times. It was during the journeys in India that I got to meet ordinary people and the experience was both exhilarating and humbling. It was now that I got a first-hand experience of the generosity and wisdom of the people of this land. They are ordinary people. They are farmers, artisans, craftsmen, landless and migrant labourers and their families. They are truck drivers and cleaners and roadside mechanics, teachers in small mofussil towns and villages and their students, village doctors and their patients, workers in small factories and workshops, nomadic shepherds and their families, daily-wage earners; carpenters, plumbers and electricians who live in the slums of the cities: dock workers, miners, brick kiln workers, workers in huge steel and other manufacturing plants, tribal, tea-garden workers, toddy tappers, cashew and coir workers, duck farmers, silt gatherers, railway men, postmen, fishermen. I have been recording the voices of all these people. And these voices have told me another story of my country.

What follows next are some tales of some of the people I have met. It was through them that another world opened to me.

soliloquy 2

Why have I suddenly thought about Studs Terkel? Maybe it is because I think he was a strange man. He spent a lot of time, years it seems, interviewing hundreds of ordinary American citizens as they talked about their dreams and anxieties, about their fears, their jobs, their marriages, and children, about religion, race, politics, and just about everything. His books Working, Division Street and The American Dream revealed his enormous effort. Perhaps he felt that through these interviews the reader, Americans or anyone else, would get to understand his country and what it really represented. Now I would like to ask Studs Terkel a question. How can ordinary citizens become spokespeople for a society that has only film, sport, pop and rock stars, tycoons, CEOs and socialites as its icons? Isn't that the American dream? How can he listen to the voices of people who shouldn't be heard? Maybe Studs Terkel was a foolish man. I also think he was a good man.

the murder of dreams

The year was 2002. I was travelling across India and I had been on the road for about two continuous months. It was while taking a short break in Patna, the capital of extremely volatile state of Bihar, that I met her. She was small, almost tiny, and dressed in jeans and a denim shirt. She wore canvas shoes. I was slightly surprised to see a young woman dressed like that because I knew it would find little acceptance in the conservative society that existed in Bihar. But. There she was, dressed almost defiantly

'My name is Sarita,' she says.

I nod, waiting for her to continue.

'Would you have the time to come and see the project that my colleagues and I have started in some villages?' she asks.

I am a bit taken aback because I am scheduled to go elsewhere.

'Where is your project located?' I ask.

'It's in Gaya district, about four hours from Patna.'

We are supposed to be heading north, Gaya is in the south. I hesitate. I look at her and something in her look sets me thinking.

'Why have you come to me?'

'Because I had heard you would be coming to Patna.'

'Yes, but why did you want me to see this project?'

'Because I have heard of you, that's why,' she replies.

I am flattered, but not enough.

'And I also know of your work,' she added. 'If you come and see what we've been doing, I think you'll be interested.'

I look at Jennifer who is carefully listening into the conversation. She nods imperceptibly. I agree to go along with Sarita.

‘I hope we get there in time to see your project,’ I say, ‘because I will have to leave by the evening to get back to Patna tonight.’

My film crew team and I, with Sarita as a guide, drive towards Gaya.

‘What is your project about?’ I ask,

‘I can’t tell you about it, it is something you have to see for yourself.’

We drive in silence after that. It takes us about six and-a-half hours to reach the village she was talking about because of the bad roads. An agitation on the highway which leads to a circuitous diversion on worse roads further delays us. Sarita keeps looking at her watch. She seems tense. By the time we reach the village, the light is fading and Sarita turns to me anxiously.

‘It’s getting dark and there is so much we want you and your crew to see. There is so much the villagers want to talk about . . . I know you will have to leave soon.’ Her voice trails off. We get out of our vehicles and head towards the village. A large group of people— men, women, and children—silently watch us approach.

Sarita introduces us to some of them and then quickly takes us to the field where another group awaits us. Among them is a young man. Sarita introduces him to us. His name is Mahesh. The young man smiles and shakes my hand.

‘We wanted to show you so many things but I know it is late now and you can’t film anything,’ he says. ‘Could you at least talk to the villagers for some time, and then go back to Patna? Please listen to what they have to say.’

‘What did you want to show me?’ I ask.

‘We wanted to show you a canal that all of us built,’ says Sarita.

‘What’s so special about the canal?’ I ask.

‘It was built by the people of forty villages. We wanted to show you the change the canal has brought to their fields, to their villages and to their lives,’ says Mahesh.

I turn to look at the villagers. It is dark and they stand there silently observing the film crew and me. I know we have to leave soon if we want to get back to Patna before midnight, but there is

something in their silence that reaches out to me and my crew. We decide to spend the night in the village and we are accommodated in a nearby school.

What we see the next morning is nothing short of a miracle.

Over a span of six months, the people of forty villages had come together to build a canal. All of them were small or marginal farmers. They came together to build a canal that was forty-four kilometres long, about twenty-five feet wide and fifteen feet deep. The men, women and children slogged for six months. They were Kshatriyas, Scheduled Castes, Muslims, Brahmins and backward castes and they worked together. Each village also built two large tanks for the storage of water. Soon the water started to flow. Fields that were once barren turned green. In the villages themselves there was a common area for keeping cattle. The villagers learnt the basics of hygiene and the pathways were clean and swept. There were functioning primary schools and health clinics. The people had, by organizing themselves, forced an uncaring civic administration to heed their demands. It was a land transformed.

And how did this miracle occur? Because of two concerned people: Sarita and Mahesh. She, a social activist, and he, a trained engineer. Together they spent about two years persuading the villagers. They convinced them that even if the civic authorities had done nothing for years, they, the people, could do things for themselves. Sarita and Mahesh started by talking to the people of one village. Then they talked to the people of another. Slowly the list grew and the people of the different villages began meeting each other. Finally all of them started work on the canal that would pass through their fields.

My crew films the canal and the villages. We interview the villagers and they talk confidently about how they united and how their lives have changed. They were also now planning to grow

two crops a year!

It was amazing. Here were people who, for most of their lives, had remained silent and unheard, and now they were speaking confidently about their hopes for the future.

Having recorded them, I turn to talk to Sartia. She and Mahesh had been silent all through my conversation with the villagers. Sarita hesitates. I prod her, I ask her if she had any message for the rest of India. 'Yes,' she says softly. 'I want to tell the poor that they needn't despair. All they have to do is get together and they can change things around. They don't need the government or officials to get their work done. Their destiny is in their own hands.' I record her interview and then my crew and I leave.

A year later, a small write-up appeared in an English newspaper. It mentioned the murder of two activists in the Gaya district of Bihar. The names of two activists were Sarita and Mahesh. The report mentioned that their activities had angered the liquor mafia in the region, the big landlords, and also sections of the civil administration. It seems that one night, as Sarita and Mahesh drove down to Patna on their motorcycle, which they did often, they were gunned down on a lonely road. There were no further reports about their murder.

It is a terrible story, but I had to tell you about it. They were two young and wonderful people who had so many dreams and wanted to do so much for their country. You would have loved to have met them.

people on the brink

As my crew and I travel in a remote part of central India, we come across two adivasis sitting under the shade of a tree in a barren and harsh landscape. A little distance away are some goats and cows grazing. We get out of our vehicles and approach the couple. As we get nearer we realize that the two are elderly and that the woman has a child lying limply across her lap. We hadn't noticed the child. I brief our interpreter to tell them about the purpose of our journey; and to request them for an interview. The interpreter, a middle-aged adivasi himself, nods.

We reach the tree and the interpreter introduces us to the couple. They do not look at us, or at him, but somewhere in between. I observe their hands. They are gnarled with parched skin over bones. Their eyes are glazed and they seem in another world. As the interpreter continues to speak, I look at the child on the woman's lap. It is painfully thin. Its eyes are shut and there are flies on its face, which the woman occasionally brushes away. The flies go away and return within moments. The interpreter talks for a while and I realize that he is telling them how important we are, that we are from the big city. He points to our vehicles too which are parked some distance away. The couple barely glance in the given direction before turning away. The interpreter talks for some more time and the only response he gets is an occasional murmur. Otherwise, the couple is silent.

The interpreter is getting animated

'What are you telling them?' I ask.

'Sir, I'm telling them about you and they are not showing enough respect.'

I decide to stop him from talking about us and to get talking to them myself.

Through the interpreter I found out that the goats and cows they are tending belong to a farmer who is not an adivasi. There are about fifteen goats and three cows. The couple will be paid four rupees for the day. When I ask if the four rupees is for each of them I am told it is for both of them. I then ask about the child. It is their granddaughter. Both her parents are working in the coal mines in a neighbouring state.

'When did they leave?' I ask.

About two years ago is the answer.

'Why?'

There is nothing to do here, is the answer.

I look at the child on the woman's lap. She moves a little and adjusts herself.

'The child looks ill,' I say.

The statement is translated by the interpreter. The old woman just nods and brushes away some flies from the child's face. The conversation is getting terser and I desperately want a little more interaction. I turn to the interpreter.

'Have they taken the child to a doctor?'

He asks them the question. There's a murmur in reply from the elderly man. The interpreter turns to me.

'They plan to do that.'

I ask when? The three-way dialogue is repeated and the answer given.

'Soon.'

'For how long has the child been ill?'

'For some time.'

I am getting exasperated. Then I notice the old woman dip her finger into an earthen pot next to her. It comes out wet and she puts the finger to the child's mouth. The child's tongue emerges and licks the finger. I ask the interpreter what is in the pot. I am told it is mahua, an alcoholic brew. I look at the pot and right next to it, on a dry leaf, is some red paste. The woman dips a finger in the paste and brings it to the child's mouth. The child's tongue licks at the paste.

'What is that paste?' I ask.

'It's a kind of chutney,' says the interpreter.

'What is it made of?'

'From ants,' is the answer.

I look at the couple again as they sit silently, staring into the distance. I keep looking at them, wondering what to say or do. What are they thinking about? I try to imagine their world: their son and his wife working in the coal mines far away and they, tending a small herd of goats and cows for four rupees a day. They also have a sick grandchild. Which doctor would they go to? Would he really be a doctor? Where would they find one? Would the doctor be interested in curing the child? How much would he charge as fee? What would the medicine be? Would it really be medicine? And all that the couple have at hand for sustenance is a pot of mahua and a chutney made of ground ants.

Not knowing what to do, I get up and wish the couple goodbye. They don't even look at us as we depart. We walk some distance before I turn around and head back. I take out a five hundred rupee note, a denomination of currency that has recently been introduced by the Government of India. I walk to the couple and put the note in the hand of the elderly man murmuring some stupid reason for doing so. He does not even look at me as I walk away. Does he know it is a five hundred rupee note? What will he buy with it: medicines, food? And what guarantee is there that the medicine he buys for his grandchild's illness is not adulterated? After buying whatever he does, what will he get back as change. Will the change really be given to him? Will the money I have given him make any real difference to his life?

It is another terrible story and it keeps haunting me. But let me add something more. I think at least five per cent of the people of my country are in the same condition. That's around fifty million people. And other ten per cent are in conditions just slightly better. That makes a hundred and fifty million people. There are at least another ten per cent who are desperately poor. That makes another one hundred million people. And at least

another two hundred million people are just about making ends meet with nothing to spare and no hope for a future. That is a total of about four hundred and fifty million people. They are people on the brink, on the absolute edge.

I know the figures I have given will be hotly debated by the people in power. They will question my sources. I have none. All I do know is that over the last fifteen years I have scoured this vast land of ours by road. I have travelled north, south, east and west. I have travelled in the hills, in the desert, in the plains, and in the jungles. I have travelled over terrain that would test the mettle of even a four-wheel drive. And, I have met people all over. What I have seen paints a sorry picture for the world's largest democracy. It takes extreme gall and extreme callousness for a government to say that 'India is shining'.

And yet, India is shining. It shines in the stories I have picked up about ordinary people who are part of millions upon millions of invisible Indians. Let me tell you some of their tales. It will make you feel happy.

the truck drivers who spread love

I am driving with my team from Madhya Pradesh and into the state of Gujarat. We are on a state highway when I notice the back of a truck that is ahead of us. It has a huge painting of a woman in flowing robes trying to cross a river with an earthen pot in her arms. Across the river is the tiny image of a man looking at her. The painting is arrogantly signed: it was 'Ali Jaan, Faridkot'.

Now, Ammi, I am absolutely sure that the art experts across the world would have found the painting grotesque and, in their wisdom, they would probably be right. But somehow I wasn't interested in their wisdom as I ask my driver to overtake the truck and to signal it to stop. I want to interview the driver. The truck comes to a halt a few yards behind us.

As I walk up to the truck, the driver and cleaner get off and look at us curiously. My cameraman and sound recordist are already taking their position. I introduce myself as a filmmaker who is travelling around India and request an interview with them. They look at each other and smile.

'Interview?' asks the driver. 'Go ahead.'

The camera and sound start rolling.

'First, I would like to know your names.'

'I'm Sukhwinder and he is Pammi.'

'Is Pammi short for Paramjit?'

'It is,' says Pammi.

'Where are you from?'

'Faridkot, Punjab.'

'I want to talk about the painting on the back of your truck,' I say.

Sukhwinder and Pammi look at each other and smile once again.

'Why are you smiling?'

'Because I told Pammi that you were asking us to stop because of the painting. So many people like you have done so.'

'What do you mean by people like me?'

'I mean important people. You want us to tell you about the painting?'

I nod and all of us move to the back of the truck. Sukhwinder and Pammi stand in front of the painting and describe it to us.

'It is the tragic love story of Sohni and Mahiwal. See? There is Sohni trying to cross the river to meet her lover. But she drowned. And look there! There is Mahiwal waiting for her.'

'Why do you have this painting on the back of your truck?'

'Why? Arre, because nowadays no one has time for true love. No time for sacrifice. So much tension! How to earn money! How to get a job! So much fighting about religion! So, since we have to travel around the country, we thought why not spread this message. See? People like you stop and ask and we tell you their story.'

'Who is the painter?'

'We asked the best man in Faridkot. His name is Ali Jaan. We told him we would pay him a hundred rupees for it. But you know something? He didn't charge us anything. He did it for free.'

'It's a beautiful painting,' I say.

'Ali Jaan is the best,' says Pammi.

'Thank you for talking to us, Sukhwinder. Thank you Pammi.'

'Will this programme come on television?' asks Sukhwinder.

'I don't know. Maybe it will,' I reply.

Sukhwinder and Pammi get back into their truck and drive away. My crew and I watch them for quite a while in silence.

the laughing, unpaid tea-garden worker

We are in the hills between Tamil Nadu and Kerala when we spot a tea garden. On one of the slopes are about a hundred women working. The scene is idyllic and we decide to talk to some of the workers. I ask Jennifer to conduct the interview. Being a woman, I feel she will have easier access to them. The crew get off their vehicles and descent, and the women, without interrupting their work, observe them. A young man whom we had met earlier is our interpreter because none of us can speak or understand Tamil. By the time the crew reaches the women, a few of them have stopped working and are watching us silently. Jennifer, through the interpreter, tells them the purpose of our visit. An elderly woman moves forward and takes charge.

'So, you're from television,' she says. 'Why do you want to talk to us?'

Jennifer tries to explain that we are not from a television channel but just a crew travelling around India and interviewing people. The woman laughs.

'Why?'

Jennifer is a little taken aback and tries to explain that we are trying to record the views and opinions of ordinary people.

'Why?' she asks, and laughs again.

'It's because nobody else does.'

The woman thinks for a moment.

'That is true,' she says, 'nobody does. So you are giving us a chance to speak. Wonderful, but who will listen?'

We don't know what to say. The woman laughs again.

'Anyway, it doesn't matter. So listen. My name is Nagamma. I have three children. I have been working on this plantation for nine years. Before that, I worked on another plantation for twenty

years. For the past two years we have not been paid our wages. The manager says that the price of tea has fallen in the world market and our boss is broke. Broke, my arse! He must still be living in luxury somewhere. But we work on. We are paid one-fifth of what we should be paid. But we work on. You want to know why? It is because we need to live. And to live, we need to work. The manager says we will be given our dues once the price of tea rises again. We know it is bullshit but we hope it's true. That's our story. Is that enough for you?'

Nagamma smiles and looks at the crew. The crew looks at each other.

'Can't you go to court?' asks Jennifer.

'What! And pay hard-earned money to a crooked lawyer who will be bought by the boss?'

The other women around her smile and nod.

'Have any one of you studied . . . been to school?' Jennifer asks tentatively.

Nagamma and the women around her begin to laugh.

'School?' says Nagamma. 'If we could read and write do you think we would be here? But don't think we are stupid. We watch the news on television.'

'On television?'

'Yes. We all pooled in and bought a black-andwhite set four years ago. Last night we saw the news on Iraq.'

This is 2003, just before the United States launches its invasion of Iraq. We are surprised that here, in this forgotten tea garden, are people who have heard about the impending war.

'What do you feel about that news?'

Nagamma widens her eyes dramatically and raises an arm.

'That country, America! Who are they to tell the world what to do? Somebody should take a stick and beat them. They're bullies.'

Her action is so vehement that all the women around her begin to laugh again. Nagamma laughs too.

'One last question, Nagamma,' says my wife. 'You have not been paid your salary for two years, I know you have great

difficulties, but how do you still manage to laugh?'

'So what do you want me to do?' replies Nagamma. 'Make a long face like this [she puts on a long face] and cry? I have no time for that.'

Nagamma laughs again.

the young poet of the high mountains

We are travelling again. This time we are going towards the valley of Kashmir. We halt for the night at a little hill station called Patni Top. It is here that we are told that a clan of 'Bakharwals', or nomadic shepherds, have made camp in the hills just above. We decide to meet up with them early the next morning.

As we drive up towards their camp a mist begins to surround us. After a time we find it difficult to even see the path on which we are travelling. We stop our vehicles and decide to walk. It is cold. We had walked for a little while when I glance down a slope and see a little clearing about a hundred feet below. Through the mist I can see a few roughly hewn tents and a couple of mules. Cupping my hands to my mouth I shout.

'Is anybody there?'

My voice echoes through the mist. There is no answer.

I shout again. And this time there is a response.

'Who are you strangers who call out?'

We try to peer through the mist into the clearing and then we see two figures emerge. One is a tall slim man and the other, short and sturdy. They look up at us on the ridge.

'We are from Bombay and we would like to talk to you,' I shout.

It is the tall slim man who answers.

'Why should we only talk sir, let us share a meal. Come on down.'

He had used 'janaab', which is so much more eloquent than the word 'sir'. It is respectful and yet much more welcoming. I hesitate at his offer.

'I have a group of sixteen people with me. Is your invitation

still open?'

'Janaab, you are insulting the hospitality of my people. It is legendary. Bring your clan down.'

He had used the word 'qabila' for my crew. Maybe my crew and I are a clan. We have been on the road for three continuous months. My team members look at each other, fascinated by the élan of the man. We all begin to descend the slope as the two men watch us come down. A few more people, including some women, now join them.

'Watch your step,' shouts the tall slim man. 'It would be tragic if someone slipped before he had a meal with us.'

Some of the crew smile and a few of them laugh. The descent is not really dangerous, only slippery? If someone does miss a step he would only slide a few feet.

'Careful, oh people of the city,' continues the man. 'Unless of course you want to slip into the mud. Then you can have a bath in the ice-cold water of a spring nearby. It will be quite invigorating.'

The crew is laughing now. We reach the clearing and I walk up to the group and look at the tall, slim man. I am in for a surprise. He is a handsome young man with a clear, open face. I was expecting an older, grizzled shepherd. The young man smiles, walks up to me and embraces me.

'My name is Basharat Ali, and may I know who you strangers are?'

We introduce ourselves as the nomads gather around us. There are about six men and seven young boys. I glance around and notice a group of women and young girls standing near a tent some distance away. There are about ten of them. A small herd of mountain sheep and goats graze nearby. There are two horses and six mules tethered beside a tent. Basharat addresses us formally.

'I welcome all of you to our paradise,' he says. 'One hour spent here will give you a year more in your city. That is why we have no doctors. They have a hard time finding patients.'

We smile again.

'Come, I will take you around.'

We follow him and begin filming.

'Here is our world,' he says. 'Go on, take pictures of it. It isn't much but does a man need more? A sky above, this crisp air and these mountains! Can any sultan have a more luxurious home?'

'No,' I say.

Basharat looks at me and smiles.

'You know something, janaab? When people have nothing, when their life is an endless cycle of wanderings because they have no alternative, they find solace in words. Would you like to change places with me?'

Basharat has made his point. He smiles and continues.

'Janaab, when I see these young people around you with their cameras and these machines, I feel envious. I even see young women in your clan. They all seem to be so qualified . . . ah . . . if only . . . but never mind. We have our destiny and you have yours.'

It is over a superb breakfast of parathas, rock honey and black tea that we get to talking to Basharat Ali. His eloquence is amazing. He talks about the life of the Bakharwala. The summer is spent with their herds grazing in the high mountains and the winter in the lower hills around the Jammu region. It is continuous. It is relentless. To soften the impact of such a harsh destiny, god has thrown in a few perks: incredible vistas of lush and beautiful valleys, imposing mountains, clean and refreshing air and wondrous streams. But, over the last few years, their life has been given an added, dangerous twist. It is the militancy and violence in the Kashmir valley. They are trapped between the militants, the army and the police. Their traditional grazing lands are now fenced off with barbed wire, landmines and check posts.

'If God has decreed that we shall follow our herds eternally why does He add to our misery with barbed wire and bullets. And then we have the militants who don't trust us thinking we are informers, and the army thinks we are spies. God knows we are neither. We just want to be left in peace.'

We finish our conversation and get up to leave. I want to give Basharat the supplies of tea, sugar and biscuits that we have with us. He seems to guess my intention.

'Please don't do that,' he says.

'Do what?'

Basharat smiles.

'Whatever is on your mind, it would insult our hospitality.'

I smile and nod.

'Where will your journey take you now?' he asks.

'We are going into the valley.'

Basharat Ali looks at me thoughtfully for a while and then whispers.

'Remember, you are entering a domain of tears and death. Tread softly and God be with you and your clan.'

He embraces me again.

On the drive towards the valley I think about Basharat Ali and I smile to myself. I find it ironic that a Bakharwal should be concerned about our safety. Here is a man who is so completely vulnerable, his clan right in the middle of the firing line, trapped on all sides, with no access to 'higher-ups' to protect them in any emergency, and yet he is worried about us.

P.S. This was supposed to be a happy story Ammi, but I have just received some terrible news. In the recent earthquake in Kashmir in December 2005, Basharat Ali lost fourteen members of his extended clan. They were buried alive in a landslide high up in the mountains. Whose side is god on?

five loaves and two fish

My team and I are in Bolangir in the state of Orissa. This district is amongst the poorest in India and we are in a village talking to the people who live there. This is a community of marginal farmers, potters and landless labourers. We have spent about three hours in this remote village when we realize it is abut two o'clock in the afternoon and we haven't had lunch. All of us are hungry because we had set out at six in the morning to reach the village, and all that we had on the way were cups of tea and some biscuits. We decide to leave and I ask one of the villagers whether there is any dhaba close by where we can get something to eat.

The man smiles and says that we won't be able to find food for the next eighty kilometres.

'What?' I ask.

'You'll have to go to Bolangir town, sir. That's the only place where you will find food.'

I think to myself that, considering the conditions of the mud-tracks, dirt roads and the distances, it will take us another three-and-a-half to four hours to reach the town. I sigh and ask the team to pack up, load the vehicles and start moving.

'Would you like to eat with us, sir?'

I turn to look at the man who had made the offer. He is young and bare-chested. I hesitate. The young man smiles.

'You have come a long way to talk to us and we are grateful. All we can do is offer you what we have.'

I turn to look at the other men, women and children who have surrounded the team. Some of them nod and smile too, encouraging me to accept the offer. I hesitate.

'No thank you,' I say.

The villagers nod silently.

'Is it because we are untouchables, sir?' asks a little boy standing right next to me.

I am shocked by the statement because I had no idea that they are dalits. I look at the boy and then turn to the others.

'No, it's not that. I have a team of fourteen people with me. It's too many. But thank you very, very much.'

'We can all eat a little less,' says a gaunt old man and smiles.

'Are you sure?' I ask.

There are nods all around.

'All right, let's eat.'

The children happily and noisily hold the hands of my crew members and escort them to an open piece of land at the centre of which is a huge, shady tree. Surrounding the patch of land are the homes of the dalits. The women enter their huts and emerge carrying urns full of kanji, a kind of gruel of boiled rice and water, and the next thing I know, all of us are drinking straight from the urns and passing them around between the villagers and us. There is laughter and singing and more laughter.

It was kanji, Ammi. It was just boiled rice and water. Boiled rice and water that was just about enough to satisfy the hunger of the families of the villagers, but that day it was shared and fifteen extra people were fed. Kanji, that's what the villagers had for their meals day after day, month after month. On very special occasions they would add potatoes and fish, and then, in celebration, they would sing and dance.

These stories are just a fraction of the hundreds more I could tell of the wonderful people I have met. In recounting them to you, so many thoughts cross my mind. Why weren't these people angry with their lives? How could they still find the time to smile? Why didn't they just ask us to go away and leave them alone because we really made no difference to their existence? Where the hell was their God and what was He/She/It doing to them?

But there's one more tale I need to tell.

the farmer who said 'no'

My crew and I are in the state of Karnataka, in a drought-prone district, where we see a farmer desperately ploughing his small patch of land as a woman, probably his wife, follows him, sowing the seeds. The man cajoles, curses and shouts at the two bulls at the head of the plough as they move rapidly around. We watch him for a while.

I decide to interview him and the crew begins to unload our equipment. We walk towards his field. The farmer, barely taking his eyes off the bulls, notices us but continues his work.

As we approach him, I ask him in Hindi whether we can talk to him. There is no reply. A crew member who can speak Kannada, the language of the state, repeats the request. The man grunts without stopping his work. The crewman looks at me, shrugs his shoulders, and repeats his request. What follows is a barrage of words from the farmer who, without even looking at us, continues his frenzied movements. He speaks for about a minute and a half and by the expression on the face of my crew member, I know he is shocked.

'What did he say?' I ask.

The crew member sheepishly replies.

'He asked us to go away and leave him alone. He said he had just enough money to hire those two bulls for four hours and that's all the time he has to finish his ploughing.'

I feel that the crew member is keeping something hidden from me.

'He said something more, didn't he?'

'Yes. He also asked us to go back to the big city.'

'Just that?'

The crew member hesitates and then adds, 'No, he actually

told us to “fuck off” to the big city.’

The rest of the crew smiles as we watch the man and the woman continue their work. They don’t look at us. I smile too.

I know his ‘fuck off’ isn’t meant for just me and my crew. It’s also meant for a lot of other people in India.

Perhaps he was also saying ‘fuck off’ to a world that had let him down.

a sufi tale

I asked a child walking with a candle,
'From where comes that light?'
Instantly he blew it out.
'Tell me where
It is gone—then I will tell where it
Came from.'
(Hasan of Basra)

I pause to think

I will spread my thoughts a little now. I feel I need to talk about our world and where I think it is headed. Hopefully, it will help to put things in a certain perspective.

I will start with India.

At one level, India is developing at an incredible rate. The telecommunication and information technology industries have grown at a speed that leaves one speechless. Jobs have been created that never existed before. Garment and leather exports have grown enormously. The growth in the automobile industry and its ancillaries has been spectacular. The Indian news and entertainment industry is the second largest in the world and more than three million people are employed in it. Other Indian corporations are turning multinational and the country now boasts an economic growth rate of seven to eight per cent annually.

The world has taken note of these phenomenal figures. At the World Economic Forum held annually at Davos, Switzerland, 'captains' of Indian industry and technology are feted and their views taken very, very seriously. Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Pune, Delhi and its environs, Bangalore, Surat, Coimbatore, Kolhapur, Hyderabad, Chennai, Kolkata and Chandigarh—are experiencing change and development that is visibly astonishing. The huge shopping malls in these cities of India are comparable to malls anywhere in the world. Nightclubs, restaurants, discotheques, boutiques, food malls are opening in these cities too. Fashion shows and beauty contests make the headlines. International corporation and banks have opened their offices in magnificent edifices across these cities and are ready to do business with a

resurgent and dynamic nation. The stock market is booming and real estate prices in the metros have reached absurd levels. The burgeoning rich, upper and middle classes, who are having a great time servicing their needs at all levels, whether professional, social or personal, numbers in millions. All told, the figures involved in this dramatic change would be close to three hundred million people and growing rapidly.

Unfortunately, in these very same centres the infrastructure of roads, transport, sewage, water and power supply and other amenities have been strained to extreme limits and are collapsing as rapidly. Slums, overflowing sewers and constant flooding, garbage heaps, unauthorized and illegal construction, bad roads, power cuts, filth and general mayhem are growing rapidly too. And overarching all this is the corruption that has spread to every nook and corner of the system such that it has ceased to be embarrassing. But, say the optimists, things will improve and, most probably, they will, over time. And yet, what is it that disturbs me about this growth? Let me tell you a tale.

an 'all male' tale

There was a funny conversation I had with a group of young male entrepreneurs I met at a party in Mumbai in February 2006. Among them there were two exporters, a budding builder, an investment banker, a stockbroker and a restaurateur. We were discussing the plus points of Indian democracy, the phenomenal growth of the economy and how it was changing the face of the country. But everyone agreed that much more had to be done and a lot of obstacles to this growth had to be removed. At one point in the conversation I posed a question to them.

'What is the percentage of people benefitting from our growth rate?'

They looked at each other and a figure was arrived at.

'We think it's about fifty per cent.'

'Are you sure?'

'Maybe it's about forty per cent.'

'Isn't that high?'

There was a pause and then a figure was finally agreed upon.

'Some are benefitting more and some less, but not less than thirty per cent.'

'What is the percentage that you think is benefitting more?'

They looked at each other, and after a little debate, arrived at a consensus.

'It's about twenty per cent. Don't forget that's about two hundred million people! It's almost the population of America.'

'What about the other ten per cent?'

'They are benefitting a little more slowly.'

'We still have another seven hundred million people. What about them'

'They will have to wait.'

'For how long?'

'Look Mr Mirza,' said the restaurateur, 'how do we know? Ten years, twenty years, fifty years, who knows? Our bloody population negates all progress. Every year we produce more people than the population of Australia!'

The stockbroker got into the act.

'How can we create jobs for all these people?'

'Is there any solution to this problem?' I asked.

Now it was the turn of the builder.

'We should all stop fucking for twenty years and the problem will be solved.'

Everyone laughed as the builder looked around to check if he had been overheard by any of the women at the party.

The population of India is over one billion, and the people involved in the feast of this dramatic growth are about a third of the total. It was the same sixty years ago, and it is the same today. The percentage is the same and yet the numbers have trebled. Today, there are nine million young people who graduate from colleges every year and most of them have dreams about jobs and a future, and yet only abut a quarter is absorbed into the regular workforce. The rest have to make do with anything that comes their way and so many of them remain jobless. Across the country, many millions more finish school and, unwilling or unable to study further, are on the lookout for work, any work. What nobody really notices is that the biggest employers are not the blue-chip corporations that have fuelled this so-called growth but security companies that provide the personnel for factories, mills, homes and the thousands of cooperative housing societies and rich neighbourhoods of the boom towns I mentioned earlier. Providing security as a business is the biggest single employer of all.

A question needs to be asked: Who are booming, happy, middle and upper middle classes frightened of?

Those that get jobs are the lucky ones but what do the rest do? With the onslaught of globalization a lot of the small-scale industry manufacturing units and other workshops have closed down all over the country. Many poor farmers in states like Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh have committed suicide because they were in debt and could not repay their loans. The prices of agricultural produce have crashed except for the cash crops and million of people are getting off the land and heading for the cities in search of work. For a nation that has more than fifty per cent of its population below the age of twenty-five, the numbers are terrifying. Every single year, on passing out from schools and colleges, these young people will relentlessly appear looking for work. They have all seen the 'good life' on television and in cinemas, and all of them want a part of it, and most of them are also in a terrible hurry. Is the country prepared for them?

If it is not, try to imagine the social upheavals that can follow. Even as I write these words, the Naxalite movement has spread far and wide and vast areas, right in the heartland of the country, have come under its influence. Is anybody asking why?

There are two other questions that need answers.

1. Is the path to the future that the world has now chosen the only one that is good for mankind?
2. Is this path irreversible?

I have seen the affects of this path on the faces of the ordinary people that I saw streaming to and from work on the streets of New York. (I don't know where this face-reading habit of mine comes from.) I have seen it on the faces of the people in Frankfurt, Paris, and London. It was terrifying to see the anxiety, the strain and the struggle—so far removed from all those images of the good life that one saw on the hoardings and billboards with neon lights and dominated the cityscapes. Which was the Lie? Was it the look of the people on the streets, in buses, trains and cars, or the look of the people on the billboards?

And recently, the Lie was nailed. It was when a cyclonic storm named 'Katrina' struck the United States' face in the south and the city of New Orleans was devastated. The television images that covered the destruction revealed a face of America that had been hidden for a long, long time. For the first time the world saw images of the poor and working-class neighbourhoods revealing the appalling truth of how ordinary people live in the underbelly of a prosperous society. They showed grinding deprivation, despair and, in a strange way, hopelessness. I don't believe these images are unique to just one town because I have seen similar neighbourhoods in Los Angeles, New York and Chicago, and I am sure that similar conditions exist in many other cities across the country. I am not suggesting that these images are anywhere close to the whole truth about a state and a society, but they do reveal what has gone terribly wrong in the most affluent and powerful nation in the world. What will be the effect of this path in the developing world where the problems are magnified? Where just about thirty per cent participate in what is called 'progress' and seventy per cent get left out?

The rest of the world seems to have put its faith in the science, technology and wisdom of the West to lift itself out of its stupor and poverty. Has anybody asked how the West got to be where it is?

a short history lesson

I believe it was a journey that began in Europe about five hundred years ago. A journey that put science and mathematics almost solely at the service of war. It was science for supremacy in trade and profits. It led to bigger ocean-worthy ships to handle the trade with the fabulous East and the Americas. It also led to the production of armaments, weapons and warships to invade, plunder, colonize vast lands and people and to protect trade routes. The results were spectacular. Europe became rich. The driving force behind the Industrial Revolution was machines and

armaments for military superiority in the brutal battle for markets, natural resources and colonies around the world. The results were far more spectacular. Europe became much richer. The spin-offs from this revolution did lead to great changes in commercial manufacturing and production, in education, in medicine and health care, and agriculture. But they were 'spin-offs' and not the main motive. And today, after two World Wars for dominance that resulted in about a hundred and fifty million deaths, some sense has been drilled into the West. It has found equilibrium. An economic, political and social balance has been put in place that guarantees most of its citizens a decent lifestyle. This contract does not extend to the rest of the world. In fact it can only be maintained if the rest of the world is kept out.

This was the path that the West chose and continues to do so. And this path was laid down by the questions being asked. What were these questions for which science was used to provide the answers? A certain kind of question leads to a certain kind of answer and then to another question. Did anybody question the questions? Were they leading to higher wisdom or just better information for dominance over nature, dominance over competitors and dominance over other nations and peoples?

This is the philosophy of the continuous race, the endless marathon that the rest of the world has now adopted to try and catch up, and where to stop running spells doom.

Give this a thought too. My history lesson is now over.

The parable of a country that didn't quite know whether 'to be or not to be'.

the angry Turk of Nusrat Beg

The mausoleum is impressive as it rests on a hill overlooking Ankara. It is surrounded by well-kept gardens and the structure itself reveals a firm determination. Straight columns and a massive Teutonic stone building stand in front of an austere stone plaza. It tells you categorically that here lies a man who meant what he said. It tells you that he did not believe in the arches, curves and flourishes of the voluptuous architecture of the East. In fact it tells you he had a deep distrust, perhaps disdain, of all that is symbolized and that is why his mausoleum rejected any signs of it. In a vault below the large cavernous hall of the building lie his remains. Alongside the hall are deep corridors that graphically describe his life and his achievements. This is the tomb of Kemal Mustapha, the Atatürk.

As I stand there to pay my respects to Nusrat Beg's hero in the year 2006, I somehow feel I am sanding at the tomb of a Turk who was very angry.

I think he must have been because what else could a man have been who scrapped Islamic law and the sharia at one go and brought in a common civil code! It was the new code for all Turks, whether they were Muslims, Christians or Jews. He banned the wearing of the veil for women and the theological schools called madrasas. He changed the Turkish script from its Arabic and Persian roots and adopted the Roman alphabet. He even expunged the numerous Arabic and Persian words that had crept into the Turkish language and had them replaced with Turkish equivalents and where he couldn't find the equivalents, there was a wholesale theft of Western words. 'Cake' became 'kek', 'textiles' became

'tekstils', 'toilet' became 'tuvalet'. The only language that would be spoken by all the people was Turkish. In one stroke he cut his people from their history because the earlier language was too much a part of it. Kemal then moved into the arena of couture. Turbans, robes, amulets, beards and anything that reflected the East were out and the Western dress and look were in. Here was a man who had turned his back sharply on his own ancestry and looked resolutely towards the West for the salvation of his country and his people. He was the man behind creation of the modern Turkish Republic and he must have been a very angry man. Anyone who despised his past so much had to be.

By the time Kemal Mustapha died in 1938, the path had been set and there was no going back.

But:

'Damn him,' said the Kurd in the Sultanahmet district of Istanbul in 2006.

'He has destroyed my language, my history and he has left the Kurdish lands to rot. Turkey is for the Turks, not for the Kurds. They hate us and they oppress us.'

It was the first sign of dissent that I heard in a system that was meant to unite all the peoples of Turkey. There were other signs too. So many of the women, young and old, were now wearing headscarves despite the fact that they were also in jeans and shirts. There were a few other women who were completely covered in burqas. What was happening, I wondered. In the mad rush to emulate Western modernity what had Turkey overlooked?

I think it was a lot of things.

a tale of cats

Let's take cats. This is a land Ammi, you would have loved because the cats are everywhere and the people, whether they are Turks or Kurds or Christians or Jews, adore them. They are in

their homes, shops, offices and restaurants. Imagine yourself eating in a fine outdoor restaurant and suddenly you feel something rubbing against your legs. You look down and there is a cat staring up at you. In Turkey they are very quietly shooed away by the waiters but the shooing is done so affectionately that you are absolutely sure the cats actually belong to the restaurant. As you continue eating you notice that one of the waiters is feeding the cats with leftover food in a corner. As I write this piece sitting at a desk in a small travel agency in Istanbul, a cat has actually come in and jumped on to my lap and is purring away.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. Istanbul University is ruled by cats and they are everywhere except in the classrooms. Sometimes, I am told, they wander in there too. The carpet shop that I can see opposite the road from where I sit has four of them and the owner lets them play everywhere. Right now there is a group of four elderly European tourists carefully examining the carpets and the cats are all over them and the carpets. It must be terrible to make a sale in such conditions but the owner doesn't seem to mind their hindrance. The tourists do, though. To make matters worse, a baker has arrived outside the shop with a cartload of fresh bread and he offers his wares to the tourists too. They are distracted from the carpets. The owner of the shop buys some bread and begins eating it and offers some to the tourists. The tourists decline the offer and walk away. The shopkeeper and the baker continue talking to each other. Can you see this happening in Europe? Kemal Mustapha would probably have had the baker and the cats shot for their non-European behaviour. I'm joking, of course, but these are signs that define a people.

some more tales

In the same travel agency where I am sitting and where there are a few tourists who need some information, a salesman walks in. He is selling Turkish 'Armani' trousers and perfumes. The Turkish manager of the travel agency, Erdem, takes time off to

talk to the salesman as the tourists wait and watch. Erdem is dissatisfied with the salesman's goods and the salesman leaves, and he turns back to deal with the tourists. Can this ever happen in Europe?

Walk into a shop and so often you are offered a cup of tea on the house. So often, having bought something after haggling over the price, I am offered something more as a gift. I have sat in restaurants and after paying the bill realized that the dessert we have eaten has not been included. And when I turn to the owner in surprise he smiles and says it's on the house.

'On the house,' it's everywhere in Turkey. There is a very little 'on the house' in Europe. Walk into the Spice Market and the goods on display overflow tastefully and decoratively on to the street. A visitor walking by can touch and even taste what is on display with no one minding. A clever tourist, if he or she has the inclination, can wander around the market twice and have half a meal. The relationship between the visitor, shopkeeper and the goods is completely interactive. Where does this happen in Europe?

The owner of the travel agency where I sit and write has become a friend. His name is Murat Boz. Jennifer and I had gone on a trip to Cappadocia and the Aegean coast and Murat had organized the entire trip and we had arrived at a mutually agreed price. It was during this journey that we got to meet his wife and children and we shared meals together and became good friends. Then something strange happened. Murat told me that he felt he had overcharged me for my journey. He now offered to cover the hotel bills for the rest of my stay in Istanbul because he felt guilty for what he had done. What kind of people are these? Do you find them in Europe?

a tale of hustling

Are the Turks hustlers? Of course they are. Hustlers exist everywhere especially in those countries where tourists abound. But the hustling in Turkey takes on another dimension. Walk into the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul and outside most of the shops stand the young men with their one liners:

'How can I help you spend your money?' or,

'I'm a smaller cheat than the man next door,' or,

'What is the colour of your money, sir? The shop behind me needs it.'

The classic story of hustling was the one I heard from Douglas, a young Scot I had met in a café. He was passing by a carpet shop when he was confronted by the salesman who insisted he see some of the carpets. Despite the fact that he didn't want to buy one, Douglas was ushered into the shop to see some. The man showed him quite a few carpets and Douglas actually liked a small one but he had no intention of buying it. The owner, noticing Douglas' interest, quoted a price of five hundred dollars. It was way beyond what Douglas had imagined, so he smiled and walked away. As he did so, the salesman called out to him.

'Tell me a price that will break my heart but to which I can agree!'

Douglas continued walking and then decided to quote a price just for the heck of it.

'A hundred dollars,' he said.

'I asked you to break my heart,' said the salesman, 'not to kill me.'

The salesman laughed and so did Douglas as he walked away.

'Have a nice time in Istanbul!' yelled the salesman.

This is Turkey. Outside shops, restaurants and travel agencies stand these young men with their one-liners, coaxing, cajoling, persuading customers to walk in. Can you imagine this in Europe?

a lady called Gulchin

Her name means 'the Rose of China'. She is a beautiful young woman, about thirty years old, and she is dressed in a pair of light blue jeans, white sneakers and a delicately embroidered white top. Her hair is covered by a light blue scarf.

Gulchin has a shop that sells pottery and handmade jewellery in the small town of Seljuk. It was at around ten in the morning that my wife entered the shop and selected a beautiful hand-painted ceramic plate. After a little bit of haggling a price was agreed upon and Jennifer handed a 100 lira note to her. Gulchin took the note and then bent down and put it on the floor. She picked it up again and waved the note into the till and handed over the change.

'Why did you do that?' asked Jennifer.

'It's called siftah. You are my first customer of the day and I thank God for his blessings. It's a very old Turkish tradition.'

'Why did you put the money on the ground first?'

'It is to tell God that the money is not important but since God has given it to me, I pick it up and thank Him.'

Gulchin smiled, neatly wrapped the plate in protective bubble plastic and paper, and handed the parcel to Jennifer.

children and teenagers

Where else would you find the noisiest and friendliest bunch of school kids who wave out to you, ask you your name, give you mementos, want to be photographed with you and shake your hand when you meet them in museums, palaces and other tourist spots? They swarm all over as their teachers frantically try to bring them under control and get some semblance of order. Turkish parents bring their children to restaurants even at suppertime. As the Europeans watch aghast, the children run around, play with each other, fight, laugh and cry. Try finding this in Europe.

I have seen eighteen-year-old boys hugging and kissing their younger siblings. I have seen teenagers hugging and kissing their

parents, then holding their hands and walking down the streets and hugging and kissing them again. I have seen old men unabashedly squeezing the cheeks of their teenage daughters, perhaps granddaughters, which would make any Western teenager cringe in embarrassment.

This is the Turkish DNA.

Turgay's tale

'Turkey will never be able to join EU,' said Sophia, the friendly Dutch lady who is the manager of the hotel I stay in, in Istanbul.

'Why?' I ask.

'The people don't follow the rules. Europe makes the rules and the Turks break them.'

'Fuck Europe,' said Turgay, her beer-drinking husband. 'We rely too much on Europe, too much on tourists.'

Turgay is another angry Turk. He is also very funny as he speaks his broken English at the speed of an express train and talks of just about everything.

'Why we have to bow and scrape? Fucking Americans, they tell us what to do and we do. They fucking Iraq now. You want to go to Iraq on holiday? I send you. Maybe I go to Iraq and earn some money. Lots of money in construction but I don't want to die. Fuck, there no jobs here. Only in tourism. Yes sir, no sir, fuck! Is this life? I live in Germany for many years and there I hate the Turks. I come back home and now I hate the Germans. Why? I don't know.'

As he speaks we hear the muezzin's call to prayer from a nearby mosque. Turgay makes a face.

'They call to Allah. What difference it makes? My wife, she is Christian, I Muslim, so what? There is only one God up there. That God for everybody. Except Sharon. He fucking Palestinians too much. He go to hell. Fucking tourists. They came to hotel and

say “how much for room?” No “good morning” no “hello”, no smile, no nothing. Only “how much for room?”’

Turgay makes another face and shakes his head.

‘You see my antenna?’

He points to a little growth of skin next to his right ear.

‘This my antenna to God. No pray, no Allah. Allah. Just this. God understands. He knows that Turgay is good man even if he drink beer. I drink because I sad inside.’

I try to figure out Turgay’s politics.

‘Is there a problem in the east of Turkey?’ I ask.

‘What east?’

‘With the Kurdish people?’

‘What Kurdish people? What Jewish people. What Greek, what Turkish people? What Christian, what Muslim? Everyone same. Government in Ankara must understand. Fuck. Only Allah up there for all.’

Fuck, I thought to myself: ‘In a strange way, Turgay is a Sufi.’

the two Sufis of Turkey

Which brings me to Turkish music. Despite the pop, rock and funky music heard on television and in discotheques, the most popular music are the ballads and love songs that somehow seem to recall memories that come straight out of the steppes of Central Asia. The rhythms, wails and floating sounds are all reminiscent of a bygone age. This is the music that brings tears to their eyes. And it is this music that perhaps brings to them memories of Turkey’s two greatest mystics, Haji Bektash and Jalaluddin Rumi. I visited both their tombs.

The crowd at the tomb of Haji Bektash was large. It seemed that a few busloads of people had arrived at the same time. I looked at the people visiting the tomb and almost all of them were what people in the West would call modern. The young men and women were in designer jeans and T-shirts. Very few of the young women wore head scarves. The children too were dressed in jeans

and T-shirts and sneakers. The older men and women wore expensive Western clothes. And yet they were all there at the tomb. They prayed silently and left. They paid their respects to the man who had said:

'A society that doesn't educate its women is doomed.' And, 'A journey without science is perilous.'

Haji Bektash had said these things in the early thirteenth century, Ammi.

The visit to the tomb of Jalaluddin Rumi in Konya was different. The crowd was not that huge but it was continuous. Small groups kept coming in and were allowed a few moments of reflection and then quietly ushered out for the next group to enter. I observed the people here too. They were mainly teenagers and older people, there weren't too many children. Here again the people dressed in Western clothes but there were also people who seemed to belong to the poorer sections of Turkish society. They prayed silently as dervish music played softly in the background. I stood for a while and then departed to the shady courtyard outside where I met one of the attendants and asked him how many people visited the tomb every day.

'About a thousand,' he replied.

'Every day of the year?' I asked incredulously.

The man nodded. I needed to find out more.

'Are many of them tourists?'

'Not many, most of them are Turks.'

A thousand people a day. That makes about three hundred thousand a year excluding holidays. The tomb has existed for about nine hundred years. A lot of Turks have paid their respects to Jalaluddin Rumi, the Maulana who said:

'Cross and Christians, end to end, I examined. He was not on the Cross. I went to the Hindu temple, to the ancient Pagoda. In neither was there any sign. To the heights of Herat I went, and Kandahar. I looked. He was not on high or lowland. Resolutely, I went to the top of the Mountain of Kaf. There only was the place

of the Anqa bird. I went to the Ka'aba. He was not there. I asked of his state from Ibn Senna: he was beyond the limits of the philosopher . . . I looked into my own heart. In that place I saw him. He was in no other place . . .'

These two mystics are also part of the Turkish DNA.

This brings me back to Kemal Mustapha or Atatürk. I have a question to ask him: Did he try too hard to erase history and memory?

There is another question too that needs to be asked: What is modernity and which countries or people define it? The reason I have posed this question is because the future of so many countries depends on the answers.

The dangerous student is now a Grand Shaykh

It was AH 424 (or AD 1034) and the scholars and students had gathered at the home of the Grand Shaykh in Isfahan. As they sipped mint tea, a student leaned forward and began to speak.

'Master, there are certain things that are bothering me.'

'What are they?' asked Abu Ali al-Husain ibn Abdallah ibn Senna.

The student hesitated and looked around the room.

'Don't be afraid, Abu Yousef,' said the Ibn Senna. 'Questions are always good. It is only when people stop asking questions that I get bothered.'

The gathered scholars and students smiled. Abu Yousef began to speak.

'Master, let me tell you that I am a great admirer of your books *The Canon of Medicine and The Book of Healing*. Your studies on the sciences and mathematics leaves everyone astounded.'

Ibn Senna smiled. 'Come to what is bothering you. Abu Yousef.'

Abu Yousef nodded slowly and cleared his throat. 'Master, it is your work on philosophy and metaphysics that bothers me.'

'Why?'

'Because it seems you believe there can be independent truths beyond revelation. If that is the case, it could lead to anarchy.'

'Why should it? It might lead to better understanding. If a man is sick, we all know it is the will of Allah. But if we find out that he is ill because of rotting teeth and have inflamed his gums that have given him a high fever, we can treat the symptoms, can we not? And what have we found out? Rotting teeth lead to inflamed gums which lead to great pain and a high fever, we can go a little further. If we take care of our teeth it will prevent them from rotting. Will it not?'

The gathering nodded. Ibn Senna continued. 'Are these

independent truths?'

'But Master what has this to do with philosophy?'

'It is very simple, Abu Yousef. My philosophy is to find out the reasons for the causes and effects of all phenomena. We will then find a whole host of independent truths and we will be able to celebrate much more fully all that Allah has created. Ask yourselves, how does a tiny seed turn into a mighty tree? And then you will also know that if there is no seed there will be no tree. How and why do we have rainfall and thunder and lightning? How and why do the stars move across the skies? How and why does bee suck honey from one flower and pollinate another? How does wheat become bread? The list is endless.'

A scholar spoke up. 'Master, in all this theory of cause and effect and reason, where is the will of Allah?'

'Allah is the divine essence of all existence. If there was no essence there would be no existence: cause and effect. Allah has created everything but does Allah tell us why and how? It is for us to find out. Take the example of the seed that becomes the mighty tree. If it is the will of Allah the seed will receive water and sustenance and become a tree. But if you plant a seed and deny it water and sustenance will it still become a tree? It will not. This is an independent truth. Is it not?'

Another scholar leaned forward.

'What if it is the will of Allah that the seed, without water and sustenance, should grow into a tree?'

There was a murmur and Ibn Senna thought for a while. Then he spoke firmly.

'Allah is not a magician. He has made laws that govern all creation and we must try to understand those laws through observation and reason. Always remember there is a design and harmony in all that He has created. Everything on earth and on to the stars and the universe are in a fine balance and linked to one another. Learn to respect that.'

Ibn Senna got up and strode out of the room.

In the search for answers, I am now on a road that, strangely enough, was also travelled upon by Nusrat Beg and Jahanara Begum.

in the footsteps of the scholars of the 'East'

I stand inside what used to be a great mosque of Córdoba in Spain in September 2005. It is no longer a mosque but a cathedral. It is dark because the whole structure is now enclosed and I begin to wander around. Right in the centre stand the imposed Gothic additions that proclaim it to be a church or a cathedral. The additions are magnificently arrogant and assertive. They loudly state the fact that times and histories have changed.

The mosque that had twelve hundred pillars with open arches that let air and light in is now closed to both light and air. What used to be space that was free-flowing and enigmatic, that revealed a new dimension of depth, of light and shade, of movement at every change in the angle of the sun, is now shuttered. It was here that so many scholars from far-off lands must have gathered: from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, Qurtuba was the 'centre of the Western world'. It had seventy libraries and, it is said, that the Caliph's library had some four hundred thousand volumes at a time when the largest library in Christian Europe held no more than four hundred manuscripts.

What am I doing here? Perhaps it is to have conversation with some ghosts of the past. Perhaps it is also to retrieve and reclaim a history. This is the lost history of Nusrat Beg and Jahanara Begum. It is also my own history.

Hundreds of years before the European Renaissance, a great body of knowledge—of science, mathematics, philosophy and ideas from ancient China, Greece, India, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia and other civilizations— was translated into Arabic by the emerging scholars of the Islamic civilization. The scholars were

perhaps Persians, Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Jews, Indians, Christians from Byzantine, Arabs and a host of other people who added their own commentaries and insights to what they had received. 'Bayt al-Hikman' or the 'House of Wisdom', that the Arab Caliph al-Ma'mun established in AD 830 in Baghdad, was just one example of the extent to which the Arabs honoured such knowledge. From the other great libraries in Samarkand, Bukhara, Isfahan, Damascus, Alexandria, Cairo, Fez, Córdoba, Toledo and Palermo the ideas continued to flow and spread and their contribution to the study of astronomy, optics, navigation, chemistry, physics, medicine, metallurgy, biology, mathematics, philosophy, poetry, literature and history was immeasurable. It was from here that this new knowledge of the world and the universe would enter Europe through translations from Arabic and Hebrew into Latin, and later, into the vernacular languages of the emerging European states. Palermo, Toledo, Córdoba, Paris, Siena, Florence, Cluny and London would become centres for the study of these translated texts from the eleventh century onwards.

the amazing tale of al-Beruni

I was reading Amartya Sen's *The Argumentative Indian* where I came across a strange story. Sen revealed that about nine hundred years ago the scholar al-Beruni wrote an essay in which he gently admonished the Indian mathematician Brahmagupta for the harsh critique of his mentor, the other Indian astronomer and scientist, Aryabhatta. It seems that Brahmagupta's attack was based less on fact and more on the need to please his 'sponsors' and benefactors who felt threatened by the scientific and philosophical theories of Aryabhatta. Al-Beruni, in his reprimand, reminded Brahmagupta that scientific and philosophical journeys could not be held hostage to the needs of the powerful but had to have the courage of conviction.

Why is this tale of al-Beruni incredible? It is because al-Beruni, who had studied Sanskrit, was reading and translating the theories and discourses of Aryabhatta and Brahmagupta in the eleventh century, whereas Brahmagupta belonged to the seventh century and Aryabhatta to the fifth! And what was the debate between the two Indian scholars? It had to do with lunar and solar eclipses, a rejection of the standard view of an orbiting sun around the earth, a theory of the earth's rotation and a rudimentary explanation of the laws of gravity! All this was happening more than nine hundred years before Galileo. Al-Beruni was responding to what he had received as a genuine scholar would, and he is only one such example of the scholars of the 'East'. There were hundreds more who assimilated and added to knowledge from all over the world and hoped that future generations would at least have the courtesy to give them their due as they had done to the past. But it was not to be.

Heading the Censor Board was the Latin Church, the Church of Rome. I must hasten to add, there were also numerous zealots in the Islamic world who despised such scholarship and did quite a bit of book-burning of their own. But the Church went many steps further. Despite the occasional, grudging acknowledgement from some early European scholars, it was this Church that tried to erase memory and history. For over a thousand years, it attacked Islam with amazing fury and even went to the extent of sanctifying the killing of Muslims. Never in the history of mankind was so much venom spewed on another religion and, through it, on its scholars. The bag of dirty tricks was opened in the battle to win the hearts, minds and souls of people.

Here are two gems of venom.

1. 'All who die by the way, whether by land or by sea, or in battle against the pagans, shall have immediate remission of sins. This I grant them through the power of God with which I am invested. O what a disgrace if such a despised and base race, which worships demons, should conquer a people which has the faith of omnipotent God and is made glorious with the name of Christ!'

Pope Urban II at a congregation exhorting Christians to launch the First Crusade.

2. 'The beast of the Apocalypse': *Description of the Prophet Mohammed by Pope Innocent III*

The final solution lay in the fact that, where once there were hundreds, not a mosque of the Moors now remains in Spain. The great libraries of Toledo, Córdoba,

Sevilla, Saragossa and other cities were levelled or converted to Latin institutions. There is not even a trace of the hundreds of graveyards where the Moors once buried their dead. The slate has been wiped clean. What remains in the popular imagination in the West today is of an Islam that is violent, intolerant and regressive.

Fortunately, some scholars have emerged in the West who are resurrecting a past and are fighting a lonely battle to right some gross historical wrongs. One of them is Maria Rosa Menocal.

Menocal, in her wonderful book *The Ornament of the World*, restricts her arguments to the culture and civilization of Andalusian Spain and how this Umayyad civilization contributed so much to the enlightenment of Europe. It is in this book that her short notes on Ibn Senna and Ibn Rushd are revealing. She writes that Ibn Senna (Avicenna), on reading and commenting on the works of Aristotle, 'made famous claims about the possibility of scientific thought producing independent truths that could be compatible with revelation.' Menocal goes on to say that 'during those two centuries,' (the ninth and tenth of Abbasid dynasty in Baghdad), 'a vital model arose and flourished: one of secular intellectual pursuits being carried out in the context of an unambiguously religious dominion.'

Faith and reason: two seemingly contradictory visions of God and the universe that coexisted side by side on the shelves of libraries right in the heart of a city, Baghdad, that was the capital of the Caliph.

And, defending this vision across time and space in Spain, was the other thinker, Ibn Rushd. Menocal describes how the thirteenth century commentaries of Ibn Rushd on Aristotle's work created ferment in the Christian world. In 1210, an Episcopal Synod in Paris banned the 'Commentaries', and five years later, the Pope himself issued a prohibition against the study of Ibn Rushd's works in Paris. But despite repeated promulgations, Paris was exploding with heretical thought.

Menocal goes on to add, 'Although it is little remembered, and its cultural setting little understood, this moment of intellectual crises in Paris was a watershed in Western cultural life. At its heart lay the lifework of an Andalusian thinker, Averroes (Ibn Rushd), as well as the whole intellectual and cultural complex of Islamic Spain.'

Ibn Senna and Ibn Rushd; two half-forgotten ghosts who once strode magnificently on this earth and laid the foundation of another way of seeing and understanding our world and the universe.

I walk across an ancient Roman bridge that spans the Guadalquivir river and enter the Roger Garaudy Museum of Torre de la Calahorra. It is here that I realize that all memory of the past has not been erased. It is here that a few dedicated people are reconstructing a time and space that lay concealed for so long. In darkened rooms and wearing a pair of headphones, I briefly hear the words of Ibn Rushd, Maimonides and

Ibn Araby. I hear about the contributions of the Moors to agriculture, science, music, medicine and architecture. The commentary is brief, but at least it is a start.

I now begin to roam the old city. I enter a home that once

belonged to a Moorish scholar. It is here that I read a poem that is attributed to an anonymous poet of those times.

A smile costs nothing and yet produces a lot.
It enriches the one who receives it
Without making the one who gives it any the poorer.
It lasts only an instant
But the memory it leaves sometimes lasts forever.
No one is rich enough to be able to do without one;
No one is so poor that he does not merit one.
It creates happiness in the home.
It is a tangible sign of friendship.
A smile makes he who is tired feel rested,
It gives heart to those who are down,
It cannot be bought, nor loaned nor stolen,
For it is a thing which has value
Only the moment it is given.
And if, from time to time, you should meet someone
Who no longer knows how to smile
Be generous, give him yours,
For no one quite needs a smile as much
As he who cannot give one to others.

I wander around some more. At one point, in the Jewish quarter, I see a statue of a handsome bearded man who is wearing a robe and a turban. In his hands he holds a book. The tourists walk up to the statue, then stop and touch his feet. He is wearing Moorish boots.

The legend is that if you touch his feet some of his wisdom will rub off on you. It is a statue of Maimonides, the great Jewish scholar.

face to face with a hero of Nusrat Beg

It is late at night when I locate the recently installed statue of Ibn Rushd. It is set in a little square outside the outer walls of the fort. In a nearby café sit a group of tourists. Nobody really notices the

statue. I walk up to it and gaze at the bearded, turbaned face. It seems to be looking out in the distance and yet also seems to feel my presence. I recall what I had heard in the darkened rooms of the Roger Garaudy Museum:

A disciple: 'Master Ibn Rushd!

Ibn Rushd, . . . medicine, astronomy, all the sciences . . . you always want me to explain what Aristotle said about the knowledge of earthly things. But never ask yourselves the ultimate questions: Where do we come from? Where are we going? Creation is, above all, the goal and meaning of life and history.'

A disciple: 'Master, today . . .'

Ibn Rushd: 'Today, as always, our philosophy would serve no purpose unless it can link these three things, which I have tried to unite in my book *Harmony of Science and Religion*.

'Science: it should be founded on experience and logic, to discover the causes.

'Wisdom: it should reflect on the goals of all scientific research so as to make our life more beautiful.'

A woman: 'But for us women . . .'

Ibn Rushd: 'Women have been prescribed the same ultimate goals as men . . . The Quran only distinguishes between those—men and women alike—who seek to follow God's law and those who do not. There is no other hierarchy among human beings. But you men consider women as plants; you seek them out merely for their fruit, procreation. And you place them apart from yourselves, as servants. These are traditions of your own making. They have nothing to do with Islam.'

A student: 'What about our kings?'

Ibn Rushd: 'The Prophet taught us that there is no holier cause than that of telling the truth to an unjust leader. The tyrant is the greatest slave of all. He is enslaved to his passions by his courtiers as well as his own fears, because he himself is afraid of his people.'

Another student: 'But what, then, is the best society?'

Ibn Rushd: 'One where each woman, each child and each man has all the means to develop their God-given potential.'

A student: 'What are the characteristics of such a society?'

Ibn Rushd: 'A society is free and pleasing to God when no man acts out of fear of a prince or of hell, or out of desire for a reward from courtiers or in heaven, and when no one says: "This belongs to me."'

A student: 'Master, one more question . . .'

Ibn Rushd: 'Enough of questions! First, I am not a Master. God alone is Master; and the most frequently repeated teaching of his Quran is to make the effort to think things out for yourselves.'

I stare at the face of the statue for a while. What was Ibn Rushd trying to say in his book *The Harmony of Science and Religion*? Was he saying that all scientific progress had to be linked with a certain kind of spirituality? I think he was, because he went on to say three very important things:

1. The goal of all scientific research is to make our lives more beautiful.

2. The best society is one where every woman, child and man can achieve their God-given potential.

3. A society is free and pleasing to God when no man acts out of fear or out of a desire for a reward and when no one says: 'This belongs to me.'

He said all this about eight hundred and fifty years ago, Ammi. As I gaze at the statue I recall what Nusrat Beg had said about him. He had called him a freethinker, amongst the first in the world. I look at the statue for some more time and then I turn around and ask Jennifer to take a photograph of one standing next to it. I have never, ever, done something like this before. Jennifer takes the photograph.

Like I said, I am retrieving my scattered history.

the tale of a man who found his name

The next morning I meet a strange man. He is a scholar and his

name is Anotonio Abd el Rehman Medina. He is a Spaniard who has reclaimed his Arab and Moorish ancestry. I ask him why and he tells me.

'It was the finest time in Spanish history, it was open and free. It was not just science and philosophy that flourished here but also a culture of tolerance, chivalry and romance. It has affected our poetry, our food, our music, our dance and our literature. Did you know that *The Man of La Mancha* of Miguel Cervantes was borrowed from a Moorish tale? Did you also know that Cervantes himself had Moorish and Jewish blood? The Moors were not just from "East". The large majority of them were Spaniards who converted to this way of life and to this way of thinking. With my new name I am only stating that I am proud of my past and I will not disown it.'

What was Antonio Abd el Rehman Medina trying to reclaim for himself? I believe it was the larger vision of these scholars. Their journeys were a celebration of the discovery of the laws of nature and the universe. Science, mathematics, philosophy and poetry were used to pay homage to a God and all that He created. It was a vision that was inclusive and sharing and was summed up beautifully by the great mystic and poet of the past Ibn Araby who, more than nine hundred years ago, had this to say:

My heart is capable of every form:
A cloister for Christian monks, a temple for idols,
A pasture for gazelles, the pilgrim's Kaaba,
The tables of the Torah, the Quran.
Love is the religion I hold: wherever turn
His camels, Love is still my creed and faith.
(from *Tarjuman al Ashq or Interpreter of Desires)*

'Love,' said Ibn Araby. *That* was the 'fatal flaw' in this vision. It lacked aggression. And, waiting in the shadows was another philosophy, harsher, more brutally clinical, that would turn knowledge inside out. It would emerge a few hundred years later and brush everything aside and ravage the world. What would

remain were memories of ‘what might have been’.

I also wish I could make a trip to Baghdad so that I could pay my salaams to all those other wonderful thinkers who gave so much to the world. But I cannot do so. It is because the Americans have invaded Iraq and are tearing it asunder. Ever since they invaded the country more than six hundred thousand Iraqis have died and more than ninety per cent of them were civilians. The guerrilla war of resistance has been savage. The Americans claim to be introducing democracy to a land that was the cradle of civilization, and so much of its past has been bombed and looted. Quite a bit of the root will finally be found in grand mansions in New York, London, Paris and elsewhere in the West. There is now mayhem in the land. This is the real clash of civilizations. The West versus the Rest, as the ‘scholar’ Samuel Huntington put it.

the world according to Samuel Huntington

Samuel Huntington is considered an eminent American scholar. He propagated a view that, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, all future flash points and wars would be fought on civilizational fault lines. The man believed that what separated the West from the rest of the world was the history of its uniquely evolved and perhaps, superior, institutions. This is what would unite the countries of the West in their struggle for supremacy against the rest of the world.

Samuel Huntington is a practical man. He believes there will be always be the 'other' and that wars will always be fought for supremacy. Therefore, the best course for the West today was to unite under the mantle of its shared history, culture and values.

But, I must remind Samuelji about what theories of the 'other' did to our world. It decimated the Native Americans and Australian Aboriginals. The Incas, Mayans and Aztecs met the same fate too. What it did to Africa makes one shudder at the extent of the plunder of the continent and the humiliation and devastation of its people. The Inquisition and the Holocaust are examples of the 'other' too. Need I go on? But I must get back to Samuel's 'Thesis'. Quite a bit of it became the underlying logic to launch a terrifying war on Iraq.

a Sufi tale

Mulla Nasruddin watched from a distance as the priest, high up on a ladder, approached the beehive hanging from a tree.

'Be careful,' shouted Mulla.

'Nothing will happen,' said the priest. 'I have prayed to Allah and he will protect me.'

The priest then proceeded to break the hive to get at the honey. Suddenly the bees emerged in the thousands and attacked the priest who screamed, fell off the ladder and landed on the ground. He was bitten badly as Mulla rushed up and helped him escape. The priest moaned and groaned and cursed the bees.

'What did you expect?' said Mulla. 'You tried to break their homes, kill their children and steal their food. Did you expect them to welcome you?

'. . . in the twentieth century
grief lasts at most a year.'

I have used this quote from the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet as a prelude to a small tale before I go on to the War in Iraq. The reason I chose to use this quote is because I wonder how long grief lasts in the twenty-first century. Is it now a month? Two weeks? Or just enough time for the television cameras to record it and then it's over? I don't know.

a tale of mistaken identity

It is late at night in early January 2005 and I am watching a CNN news programme on television about an operation of the American Special Forces in Afghanistan. The operation was to flush out remnants of the Taliban and al Qaeda groups that were still functioning in a remote and mountainous terrain. The CNN camera crew was allowed to cover the operation and tell the world and specifically Americans, of what a great job the Special Forces were doing.

The report began as the camera elatedly caught the group of about fifteen soldiers as they combed the inhospitable area. Suddenly there was a surge of excitement as one soldier, through his binoculars, spotted a furtive figure on a ridge. The word was quickly passed on and the other troops quickly began to manoeuvre themselves and move forward. Their expertise was apparent as the cameraman followed them and they rapidly spread out and covered all avenues of escape. Once in place, a soldier shouted out a command to the figure on the ridge. The figure began to run. There was a command for him to stop. The figure kept running. The soldier closest to the figure opened fire and it spun around and dropped down.

'Got him,' was the shout. The Special Forces along with the CNN cameraman excitedly moved forward to where the figure lay. As they came closer, they moved more cautiously, ready for any eventuality. The cameraman moved forward cautiously too. And then they all saw their opponent.

It was a boy. He was about ten years old and he was still alive. He had been shot in the back and the bullets had ripped through his body and exited from his stomach. The boy looked at his assailants silently and in shock and his assailants looked at him in

wonder too. The cameraman caught all the action when suddenly one of the soldiers turned towards him and asked him to stop recording. The cameraman turned away from the boy and caught the image of the soldier who had pulled the trigger. The man was squatting on the ground in a daze and then he covered his face with his hands.

It was later found out that the boy was a shepherd tending his flock and he ran because he was frightened. He couldn't understand those commands he was supposed to follow and he got shot in the process. The boy was quickly flown out to a military hospital to try and save his life. His father arrived at the hospital a day later and the young boy told him weakly he wanted to go home. The father looked at his son and began to cry. As he cried he turned to the doctors and told them that he had lost his entire flock of sheep and goats and now he also had a critically wounded son. The report ended here and I do not know if the boy survived. His name was Azizuddin.

This is a story of war. It wasn't supposed to turn out this way but it did. The report was never repeated on Indian television and I wonder if it was repeated elsewhere. Most probably it was not.

a war without an end

I now come to a war Ammi. It was a war began in the year 2003 by the United States of America and England against a weak and helpless Iraq. The reasons given for the war turned out to be patently untrue. In fact they were lies upon lies upon lies. I also believe that this is a historic war and it will not fade away into memory as most wars do. The war is still raging but it has opened up possibilities that will have immense consequences on the future of the world.

the war of words

The process of this war started when Mr George Bush and Mr Tony Blair, the President of the United States of America and the Prime Minister of Great Britain respectively, said that Mr Saddam Hussein, the President of Iraq, had weapons of mass destruction. These weapons were seen as a direct threat to Western civilization. So a case was prepared and Mr Colin Powell, the Secretary of State of the United States of America, presented the evidence to the United Nations' Security Council. It was incredible. There were audible sniggers from the audience and diplomats present as the 'evidence' was telecast live across the world. The world, tuning in, sniggered too. The evidence was so flimsy, so inadequate, so doctored. The resolution passed by the Security Council did not sanction the war. A second, and clearer resolution for or against the war was awaited. Then a strange thing happened.

It seemed the people of the world knew that the wait for the second resolution was a fig leaf and that the war was going to be inevitable. So they began to march against it. They marched in Europe, in Asia, Africa and Latin America, in Australia, in

Canada. Even in the USA.

So, the political leaders in the USA and England began to use words like 'Civilized', 'Free', and 'Democratic'. They said this war was against the 'Uncivilized', the 'Unfree' and the 'Undemocratic'.

The opponents to the war continued to march on and their numbers grew.

To counter these demonstrations the Government of the United States of America cranked up its new blitzkrieg. 'Friendly' journalists of the press and television channels, government spokesmen, 'friendly' experts and 'friendly' Iraqi dissidents were rounded up to tell the world what a demon Saddam Hussein was and what he had done to his country.

The opponents to the war still marched and their numbers grew into the millions. It was incredible to see them on the television screens. The sheer numbers of people marching forced the television channels to give the world a glimpse of them even as their summoned 'experts' expounded on the need for war. It was surreal as I kept switching the news channels. I saw the strategists, pundits and other wise men discussing 'war scenarios' as people across the globe marched for peace. Were these marchers supporting Saddam Hussein? They were not. They were marching because they believed this war had another, more cynical, agenda.

Then, a strange thing happened to me: I felt elated. For a long, long time I had believed that ordinary people the world over had given up hope and relinquished power to groups and lobbies that were never elected and never held accountable for their actions: the so-called 'back room boys' who really ran the world under the garb of democracy. I now realized it was not true and I suddenly remembered a Sufi tale.

the Sufi tale

Mulla Nasruddin was standing in front of a large lake and he threw a teaspoonful of yogurt into the water. A passer-by saw him and asked.

'What are you doing, Mulla?'

'I'm trying to make some yogurt,' was Mulla's reply.

The passer-by laughed.

'Are you insane? A teaspoonful of yogurt in a lake! It won't take.'

'I know,' said Mulla. 'But supposing it does?'

I really wish that Samuel Huntington had read this tale before he presented his 'Thesis'.

I began to look at the faces of all those marchers. There were so many of them and they were marching all over the world. And, surprisingly, thanks to globalization, these images were being seen everywhere despite the desperate political need of the people who launched this war to shut them out from the television screen. I saw the truck drivers Pammi and Sukhwinder marching in Buenos Aires. I saw Nagamma, the tea garden worker, marching in Sydney, I saw Sarita and Mahesh marching in London. I saw the landless labourers of Orissa marching in Caracas and I also saw Basharat Ali marching in Berlin.

'It's taken,' I muttered to myself.

Survey upon survey showed that the overwhelming majority of the British, French, Germans, Italians, Hungarians, Russians, Spaniards, Dutch and Greeks were opposed to the war. And, so many Americans were marching against it too. Can you believe it, Ammi? What would Samuel Huntington have to say about all this? The marchers included Australians, Mexicans, Canadians and Japanese. What would Huntington have to say about this too? Indians, Chinese, Nigerians, South Africans, Argentinians and Brazilians, in fact the overwhelming majority of the peoples of Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe and even Australia were opposed to the war despite, in some cases, their leaders endorsing it.

The tragedy of people like Samuelji that they believe that people from different civilizations are intrinsically different from one another. He thought his grand theory was the counter to the 'insane' ideas of common humanity and shared cultures between people. His political patrons and their news media used this theory

too. But millions of people across countries dared to ask instead: what if the reality we are shown is not reality? What if our lives are bound with the well-being of millions of others, however different our cultures and histories? This was the slight idea, like the teaspoonful of yogurt in the lake that took and shook his grand theory.

a tale for Mr Bush and Mr Blair

A king of China invited the philosopher Confucius to help him understand the ills that were plaguing his kingdom. Confucius arrived and the king explained to him that everything was going wrong in his kingdom and nothing seemed to be manageable. Could he, Confucius, find out what was the matter? Confucius nodded and told the king that he would have to travel around, see and meet people and he would give him the answer in a month's time. The king agreed and Confucius departed. When he came back after a month the king excitedly asked him.

'Have you found the answer Master?'

Confucius nodded. The king asked, 'What is it?'

'The words in your kingdom have lost their meaning,' Confucius replied.

Who were these people opposing the war? They were Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Taoists, Buddhists, Jains, Atheists, Communists, Animists and Anarchists. They included Pope John Paul, the Archbishop pf Canterbury, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama and Fidel Castro. Never before in the history of the world had so many people, believing in so many different philosophies and faiths, come together on a common platform. They had seen through the games of the power brokers, the greedy and the cynical and they were the majority of the people of the world. They were people like you, Ammi. They were people who never make the headlines but reach out to each other beyond the

divide of race, language, religion and culture. The hope for a future lies in these people who saw themselves and the world as a whole. This, I believe, is the first step towards what democracy ought to have been but was not.

I see you smiling again, Ammi.

Soliloquy 3

In September 2006, the new Pope Benedict made a pronouncement on Islam. There was outrage in the Islamic world and huge demonstrations were held in protest against what he had said. Benedict apologized and added that the objectionable passage that had inflamed passions was only a quote from a fourteenth century Byzantine emperor and that actually the rest of his speech was really an attempt at a dialogue with the Islamic world. I am not here to discuss the offending passage and its ramifications or whether the apology was valid. What I do know is that what the Pope said in his speech had come from a very long tradition of spewing venom and, being a man brought up on a limited diet of history, his speech was predictable.

But, I write all this to reach elsewhere. With a name like Saeed Akhtar Mirza I have to confront my own dilemmas and I have to confront the fact that so many of the mindless acts of suicide bombings and killings that have taken place around the world were done by people who claimed to be followers of the faith both my parents believed in. To fight and resist an occupation army is valid. To resist economic imperialism is valid too. When did the taking of innocent lives become valid?

I have other questions to ask about Islam too.

Has a civilization that once thrived on ideas now become afraid of them? Has a civilization that honoured knowledge from all corners of the world now become afraid of such knowledge. Has a civilization that studied the stars and the universe, found new cures for disease, encouraged debate, produced revolutionary poetry and literature and brought in new concepts in science and mathematics now come to accept the diktat of priests? Has a civilization that once relied on reason given way to rhetoric?

I don't know where the answers lie.

a final conversation with Baba

The year was 1995 and I had come to visit Baba. I hadn't been to see him for a couple of months, so I had dropped in to have a chat and cheer him up. Ever since you died, Baba had turned very silent and he used to spend a lot of his time reading, sitting in his favourite chair in the veranda. As I sat down, he raised his eyes from the book he was reading, smiled and stretched out his hand to greet me. The gesture was so much like the one he used with you when he felt he needed comfort and support. I held his hand.

'What are you reading?' I asked.

'It's a novel by Quarratulain Haider.'

'What's it called?'

'*Gardish-e Rang-e Chaman.*'

'What is it about?'

'It is about the flow of time, the revolving colours of the seasons.'

I was puzzled.

'The revolving colours of the season? That sounds strange.'

Baba smiled.

'You know each season has a colour, but the surprising thing about nature is that to arrive at that colour it has to destroy the colour preceding it.'

'Is the book interesting?'

'Very. You know, as one grows older one sees the inevitability of death and then you realize the importance of time. Who was it who said something like "to be young is wonderful and what a pity it's wasted on the youth?"'

'It sounds like Bernard Shaw.'

'Maybe it was him. Anyway, I'm amazed by the arrogance of youth!'

'What do you mean, Baba?'

'You know, when a person is young he doesn't really internalize the fact that one day he is going to die. For a long while he thinks he is eternal and that, surprisingly, is his strength. He can do things. He can create. He can change the world. It is only later that he gives up and stops dreaming.'

I smiled.

'Don't tell me you have stopped dreaming, Baba.'

'Your mother would kill me if I did. You know every morning I believe that some producer will knock on the door and ask for a script.'

'Do you have any ready?'

'I have the outlines of three and one that is finalized.'

'Tell me about the one that is finalized.'

'It is set in the eighth century and the story is about a master sculptor who defies the gods and fate for the love of a woman.'

'That sounds like an epic tale.'

'It is.'

'Do you think any producer would be interested in a story like that?'

'It doesn't matter. I have written the script and it has given me enormous satisfaction. That is important to me.'

It was just like Baba.

'How do you spend your time?'

'The mornings are spent in reading and writing. In the evenings I spend time with Reima and Talat. And in the night I think about your mother.'

'What do you think about?'

'About things that we did together, things that we could have done together, things that I am sorry about . . . lots of things. Sometime I feel such emptiness inside me. Have you a read Cervantes' *The Man from La Mancha?*'

'I have. Why do you ask?'

Baba laughed.

'I think your mother and I were like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.'

'Why do you think so?'

'Because I think both of us were wonderfully foolish. She never said no to any plan of mine, even if it was stupid. She would back me to the hilt. And all the plans failed.'

'Did you really want to be an entrepreneur, Baba?'

Baba thought for a moment.

'I don't know. I wanted to do something modern. I wanted to start an enterprise that dealt with huge machines. Actually I would have loved to have built a steel plant that would help build bridges and factories and skyscrapers, but with the kind of money I had I settled for a small bottling plant. Thank god for that. Imagine what I would have lost if it were a steel plant.'

'I'm trying to imagine you as a failed steel tycoon.'

'I wasn't really cut out for these things. You need to be another kind of person.'

'What about your fancy Western clothes? What were you trying to prove?'

I don't know. I was fed up with our lethargy, lack of purpose and sense of destiny. I just wanted to change things, at least for myself. Anyway, I am glad I finally settled down to screenwriting.'

'I think you are the best.'

'Thank you, but you still haven't accepted any of my scripts. Don't look embarrassed, Saeed. I think you see films differently and I respect that. You went into films with a purpose, I drifted into it. Let me tell you a secret.'

Baba leaned forward in his chair and smiled at me.

'The first script I wrote wasn't really mine. The idea was your mother's. You're shocked, aren't you? Let me tell you how it happened. The factory had closed down, we had lost everything and I really didn't know what to do. It was your mother who suggested I should write for films. She always thought I was a great story teller. I found the idea silly because I didn't know anything about films. Do you know what she said?'

I shook my head and Baba continued.

'She said it is very easy. All you have to do is to tell a good

story. Put it in words that sound poetic and that is all. I couldn't believe it. I said no, it's not that easy, but she kept at it and I kept saying I wouldn't do it. It became a stalemate. So, she decided to write a story herself. She would sit in this veranda, in that chair and she would write away in a notebook. And one day she had a story ready which she read out to me. It was an outline of about ten pages and I found it ghastly. It was a maudlin story about an adopted child who is so happy to find a home and a family but gets sad and depressed when his foster mother has a child of her own. The story was full of tears and more tears, enough to fill an ocean. I told her that and it really upset her. For two mornings she went to the gurdwara down the road and sat there in protest. Do you remember the gurdwara?'

I nodded and laughed.

'How did we not know about this?'

'You children had left for school.'

'So she registered her protest by listening to the verses of the Guru Granth Sahib?'

'She later said it calmed her down. She finished the cooking in the morning, and left for the gurdwara and returned at lunchtime.'

'And then?'

'You all came back from school and she made sure everything looked normal. When you people left for school the next day, she was back in the gurdwara. I felt terrible for what I had said and I apologized to her. She accepted the apology and added that I should include a few more details to her story, put it in better order and improve the language. I did so very reluctantly and we had a detailed outline ready. But I knew it wouldn't work with any producer. Our financial situation was getting precarious, so I decided to attempt an outline of a story idea of my own. It took me about two weeks and I had one ready. Luckily, thanks to one of our neighbours, I got to meet with a film producer and I read out what I had written, but he didn't like it. When I asked him why, he said it sounded a little too serious. He then asked me if I had any other ideas, I was desperate, so I told him briefly about your mother's story and he loved it! I was shocked. I hurried back home, collected

what I had written and read it out to him. He just kept crying right through the narration! And he bought the idea. That's how it all started.'

'So that's the story behind *Toote Khilone*. What did Ammi have to say about that?'

Baba leaned back on his chair and smiled.

'She just smiled. But I swore to myself that after that I was not going to write another tearjerker.'

'Why?'

'I don't think cinema is meant for this. It is meant for people to think, to try and understand the world in which they live.'

'Baba, how would you get them involved? Maybe Ammi felt that if they got involved emotionally, you could then say a lot of things.'

'I call that emotional blackmail. I believe you can tell a story that has emotions and drama but also deals with ideas. The ideas are as important to me. Sometimes I think I could have made our lives so much easier if I hadn't been so mulishly stubborn about my scripts. But not once did your mother ask me to give in. Not once. She would always say that if I thought I was right, I should stick to my stand.'

'Did you read out all your stories to her?'

'All of them.'

'Did you have any more arguments or disagreements?'

Baba laughed.

'We had a few more.'

'How come we never knew about them?'

'She would never let you children know. But I knew.'

'Did she keep going to the gurdwara?'

'I think she went just once more. After an argument I would be confronted by her silence till I apologized. I always did, even if I thought I was right. Anyway, let's change the subject. Tell me, what are you communists going to do now?'

'I don't know.'

'Are you still a communist?'

'I don't know.'

'You people must be in a deep dilemma. Look what's happened to the Soviet Union. Complete chaos! That fellow Yeltsin seems to be an utter fool. He is drunk most of the time and he is selling his country down the drain. It's a real pity.'

'What do you think went wrong, Baba?'

'Are you asking me about the Soviet Union?'

I nodded. Baba thought for a while and then he answered.

'It was an idea that had a lot of poetry in it and then the poetry disappeared.'

Though Baba and I met many times after this conversation we didn't really talk to each other. More often than not he would greet me with a smile and we would exchange a few pleasantries and then he would get back to his reading. I would sit for a while and then leave. I think he wanted to be left alone with his books and memories.

Baba died on the seventeenth of June 1996 in a hospital. On his bedside table lay the copy of the novel *Gardish-e Rang-e Chaman*. We buried him alongside your grave, Ammi. I am sure you will be very happy having him next to you. He will be too.

Before I end I would like to recall his favourite Urdu couplet.

Jaan tum par nisaar karta hoon
Main nahin jaanta wafa kya hai.

I have laid down my life for you
I don't know what else faith is.

This is my journey and I have got a lot of things off my chest. But I would l like to add that I am still a 'leftist'. My travels, in a strange way, have also introduced me to the world of the Sufis. I am not so sure what this combination of 'a leftist Sufi' will lead to, but at least it's a start.

epilogue

I am now going to offer the reader a narrative in the form of a film script that I wrote in the year 2002. It is set in the United States and is a story of friendships that can occur across civilizations and histories. You may choose to read or not to read it.

The First Lady and the Terrorist

A Film Script in Five Acts

by

SAEED AKHTAR MIRZA

ACT I

Super: The date 'August 2001' is superimposed on the screen.

Scene 1

INT—The Immigration Counter at Los Angeles Airport—Day.
Rasheed Durrani, a fifty-five-year-old, slightly grizzled man, in a worn-out tweed jacket and grey trousers stands nervously before an inquiring immigration officer. The officer, head bent, is carefully scrutinizing his documents.

OFFICER: Rash-eed Dur-rani . . . you've come in from Amsterdam . . . right?
RASHEED: Yes.
OFFICER: And before that you were in Germany?
RASHEED: Yes . . . for six months.
OFFICER (*flicking the pages of the passport*): And you are from?
RASHEED: Afghanistan . . . a United Nations' refugee.
OFFICER: Yeah. What brings you here?
RASHEED: I'm a tourist.
OFFICER (*raising his head*): You sure?
He looks at Rasheed intently.
RASHEED: Yes!
OFFICER: You have friends here?
RASHEED: My sister and brother-in-law.
The officer looks at Rasheed for some more time, stamps his papers. Hands them to him then casually asks.
OFFICER: Hey! . . . Isn't that guy from Afghanistan?
RASHEED: Who?
OFFICER: The guy who bombs our embassies . . . what's his name

. . .? You a friend of his?

Rasheed shakes his head.

RASHEED: No sir, I am not.

OFFICER: Jeez, he's giving us a hard time . . .

The officer looks at him intently then nods and smiles.

Rasheed walks off towards the Baggage Claim area.

CREDIT TITLES BEGIN.

Montage of Rasheed hesitantly going through the formalities of claiming his baggage and moving towards the airport exit.

CREDIT TITLES END.

Scene 2

EXT—Outside the airport—Day.

A well-dressed, fifty-eight-year-old man—Jamal Khan stands beside his expensive car. Rasheed, with his heavy battered suitcase stands awkwardly in front of him. Rasheed puts down his suitcase, stretches his arms out to greet him in the traditional Afghan style, when he is stopped short by Jamal holding his hand out. Rasheed shakes Jamal's hand.

RASHEED (*in Pashto*): Thank you for coming to the airport, Jamal.

JAMAL: In English please . . . speak in English.

Rasheed nods. They go round to the trunk of the car and Rasheed loads his suitcase in. Both men enter the car in silence and drive off.

Scene 3

EXT—Day.

Rasheed and Jamal in the car. They drive in silence for a while.

JAMAL: Welcome to America! So . . . you've come to the land you hate the most with your tail between your legs!

Rasheed looks at him, and then turns away.

JAMAL: What does it feel like?

Rasheed doesn't answer

JAMAL: Quite humiliating, I would think . . . quite humiliating.

Jamal continues.

JAMAL: Do you know what your sister had to do to get you a visa? She had to plead with influential people . . . pull strings . . . Didn't you have any pride left in you?

RASHEED: I had nowhere else to go . . .

Rasheed turns away.

JAMAL: All those radical ideas you believed in . . . look what it did to our country . . . what a mess!

RASHEED: We tried to do something . . .

JAMAL: Do something? Our country became a shit hole! That's why I left. I thank God I was given another chance . . . and look at you now . . . you're a wreck!

Rasheed turns to look at him.

JAMAL: Anyway, now that you're here let me tell you that we will try to help you.

RASHDEED: Thank you.

JAMAL: Don't thank me, thank your sister! Look . . . we've worked hard and we're doing well. If we can be of help to you now, good, if we can't, leave us alone. Go away.

Rasheed nods and looks away. The car turns into an expensive neighbourhood. A gate opens and Jamal enters a long driveway and comes to a halt in front of a large, plush house. On the patio stand some people.

Scene 4

INT—On the patio—Day.

Rasheed and his brother-in-law climb the steps. Three young people—a young woman, Zarina, twenty-five, and two young men, Najib, twenty-three and Nusrat, eighteen—stare at him. Rasheed's sister,

Qudsia, a silver-haired woman of fifty-two, rushes up to him, hugs him and whispers.

QUDSIA (*in Pashto*): Oh Rasheed . . . Rasheed . . . brother . . . my life . . .

JAMAL: In English please, Qudsia.

Qudsia touches Rasheed's face.

QUDSIA: Look at you . . .

She hugs him again. Rasheed looks beyond her, at his niece and nephews.

JAMAL: That's Zarina, Najib and Nusrat.

The young people awkwardly mumble—'Hi Uncle'.

Rasheed looks at them and smiles warmly.

RASHEED: Salaam alaikum! How big you all have grown!

QUDSIA: Zarina is studying medicine, Najib is in law school and Nusrat is an undergraduate at UCLA.

JAMAL: Okay . . . Nusrat, take your uncle to his quarters.

Qudsia hurriedly explains.

QUDSIA: We have a guest room in the back, near the garage. We thought you'd be . . . more independent . . . and comfortable there.

Her voice trails off. Rasheed nods.

Scene 5

EXT—Outside the guest room—Day.

Rasheed and Nusrat, who is carrying the heavy suitcase, arrive at the guest room. A slightly battered car stands outside. Nusrat turns to Rasheed.

NUSRAT: Mom's bought you this car . . . it's a bit old but it runs . . . if you don't have a car in LA, you're dead. Can you drive?

Rasheed nods and Nusrat smiles.

Nusrat: Okay Uncle . . . here's your pad!

Nusrat leads the way into the guest room.

Scene 6

INT—Inside the guestroom—Day.

Nusrat puts Rasheed's suitcase down and explains the layout of the place.

NUSRAT: This is a bedsitter. There's a toilet in there, with a shower. This is a little kitchen. Mom has stocked it with some coffee, tea, bread, cheese. There's some milk in the fridge . . . some fruit.

RASHEED: Thank you, son.

NUSRAT: That's it! It's a bit cramped but . . .

RASHEED: Do you speak Pashto?

NUSRAT: I used to . . . not any more. Mom tries to teach me but. I guess I'll be going . . .

He moves towards the door and turns.

NUSRAT: I'm really sorry about Aunty Ghazala and Ahmed.

Rasheed looks at him and nods. Nusrat stands at the door for a moment, then quietly leaves. Rasheed watches him go. He sits on his bed and buries his face in his hands.

Scene 7

INT—Flashback #1—Day.

A quiet cut to a house in Afghanistan. Neighbours watch from a distance as Rasheed, about forty-eight years old, stands in front of the bodies of a woman and a young boy lying sprawled on the stairs in front of the house. They have been shot dead.

ACT II

Scene 1

EXT/INT—Gas station—Day.

Rasheed and Jamal drive up to a deserted gas station in the warehouse district of downtown Los Angeles. Rasheed in the battered old car follows Jamal, who is driving his expensive limousine. They get out. Jamal surveys the station. So does Rasheed. Jamal turns to Rasheed.

JAMAL: This is where I started out. The first gas station I owned. You'll work here for the time that you are with us, every night except Sundays. From 10 to 6. It's called the Graveyard Shift. Do you remember the route we took to get here?

Rasheed nods, Jamal continues.

JAMAL: It's a tough neighbourhood. Mexican gangs, Negro gangs . . . drugs, guns, prostitutes . . .

He enters the convenience store. Rasheed follows. The attendant, an elderly Latino man behind the booth observes them.

JAMAL: His name is Manuel . . . both he and his son work here in shifts.

The man smiles from behind the counter.

JAMAL: But the son makes the father work most of the time . . . lazy bastard. This is called a convenience store.

People come in and pick up what they need. You collect the payment at that window . . . there!

He points to the bulletproof glass booth in the corner of the store.

JAMAL: Don't step out of it for your own safety.

There's a video camera that records everything—there.

Rasheed looks up at the camera. Jamal walks out of the store and Rasheed follows. He sees at a distance of about fifty yards, two young

African-Americans, leaning against a car, smoking and talking. Jamal notices them too.

JAMAL: Worthless bastards!

He turns to Rasheed.

JAMAL: You'll be paid $150 a week. And remember, your working here is illegal. If you get into trouble, I'll get into trouble . . . understand?

Rasheed nods.

JAMAL: So don't talk too much to the customers. And don't ever get into a discussion about politics. Your job starts tonight.

Rasheed nods, Jamal leaves. Rasheed watches him drive off. He sees a police patrol car stop near the two black men. The cops, using a very aggressive tone, question the two men. Rasheed hears them protest before they drive off. The patrol car stops for a moment in front of the gas station. Rasheed gets tense. He backs towards the store. The patrol car then cruises away. Manuel at the booth winks at him and makes the gesture of handcuffing and laughs.

Scene 2

EXT—A drugstore—Day.

Rasheed has a small pile of toiletries as he approaches the cash counter. The young cashier totes up his bill and announces.

CASHIER: 40 dollars and 20 cents.

Rasheed counts the money in his wallet. He hesitates, embarrassed. Then he takes 2 or 3 items and puts them aside.

RASHEED: Now how much?

The cashier shakes her head in exasperation and calculates again.

CASHIIER: 28 dollars and 60 cents. Is that okay, now?

RASHEED: Yes, thank you.

Rasheed pays the money.

Scene 3

INT—Rasheed's room—Day.

Rasheed arranges the toiletries on his bathroom shelf. He moves to his living area and sits on the sofa. He looks at the framed photographs on the little table next to it. It is a photograph of himself, the same woman and young boy we saw lying dead in Afghanistan. The three of them are smiling. Rasheed stares at the photograph.

RASHEED: Salaam alaikum . . .

Scene 4

INT—Gas station—Night.

Rasheed is inside the convenience store with Manuel.

He examines the products on sale with Manuel following him around.

RASHEED: You can go home now, sir.

MANUEL: No go . . . I show you . . . See?

He picks up a bag of chocolates and points to the price tag.

MANUEL: This money. Somebody take . . . you count . . .

RASHEED: I know, I know, please . . . go home . . . it's late.

MANUEL: You boss brother?

Rasheed doesn't answer and keeps looking at items on the shelf.

MANUEL: Tell him I work hard . . . Okay?

A sound makes Rasheed look outside. A car comes to a halt across the road. Linda, a thirty-year-old woman, dressed gaudily and carrying a shoulder bag, angrily gets out. She abuses the man in the car who drives off. Linda curses him some more and then heads towards the gas station. Rasheed watches her approach, and almost as a reflex action, shuts the door of the store. Linda sees him do that and taps the glass.

LINDA: Open the door. I want to use the restroom.

Rasheed looks at her and shakes his head.

LINDA: What's the mater? You new here? Hey Manuel, tell him to open the door.

MANUEL: That Linda . . .

Rasheed is confused.

LINDA: (*pounding now*): Hey! You want me to pee out here.
RASHEED: Sssh!
LINDA: Open the fuckin' door you shmuck!! Open it!

Rasheed hurriedly opens the door of the store. The woman storms in, glares at him and strides to the restroom muttering all the way.

LINDA: Asshole! All I want to do is use the goddamn restroom!

She slams the restroom door with such a force that the door opens back a little. Rasheed looks at Manuel and then walks slowly towards the restroom and looks in. He sees the woman open her purse take out a bottle of pills and pop a few in her mouth. Rasheed walks away back into the store. As he does so, he sees the two African-Americans he saw in the morning park their car at the same spot. They get out. Their music system is still playing . . . a car stops by . . . an exchange is made, the car drives off. Rasheed turns round to see the woman emerge from the restroom. She seems calmer now. She has also changed her dress to a more conservative one. The woman walks past Rasheed, sizes him up.

LINDA: You new here? Why didn't you let me in?
RASHEED: I'm sorry, I did not know.
LINDA: I work from out here. You understand?

Rasheed looks at her.

LINDA: You understand?!!
RASHEED: Yes. Please leave now, madam.
LINDA: I'm leaving! But you mess with me and you'll be messing with those two!

She looks at the direction of the two young men across the road. Rasheed turns to look at them too. Then he turns to face her.

LINDA: By the way, my name is Linda. What's yours?
RASHEED: My name is Rasheed . . . madam . . .
LINDA: Rash-eed! You talk funny. Where are you from?
RASHEED: Afghanistan.
LINDA: Say that again?
RASHEED: Af-ghan-is-tan.
LINDA: Af-ghan-is-tan!! Okay. Look . . . Rash-eed . . . be good to me as I'll be good to you . . . okay?

Rasheed sees Linda wink at Manuel and hurries out of the store. She

waves to the two men across the street. They wave back. She gets into her car parked some distance away and drives off. Rasheed watches her go. Manuel laughs.

MANUEL: That Linda . . . very!

He makes an angry face. Rasheed look at him.

MANUEL: Strong lady.

He grins showing a set of tobacco-stained decaying teeth.

Scene 5

EXT—Streets—Early morning.

Rasheed drives home back from work, following closely the instructions on a sheet of paper giving the road directions. He passes the Latin quarter of the city. At a vacant lot he sees a police cordon. A body lies sprawled as the police cover the scene of the crime. A group of bystanders watch. Rasheed drives past slowly. The police wave him on.

Scene 6

EXT—Jamals's house—Early morning.

Rasheed arrives at the house. He turns into the gate, when an attack dog bounds towards the car barking. Nusrat, his nephew, calls out to the animal and orders him to back off. He holds the snarling animal by the collar, as Rasheed gets out of the car.

NUSRAT: Hi Uncle! This is Bozo. He's let out every night . . . he should have been chained by now.

He orders the dog to keep quiet.

NUSRAT: QUIET!

RASHEED: What breed of dog is that? A Doberman?

NUSRAT: Actually a cross between a Doberman and a hound. They make good attack dogs.

RASHEED: Yes. I suppose they are needed . . .

NUSRAT: Mom's at your place . . . sprucing it up a bit!

Rasheed nods and goes to his room. The dog snarls at him as Nusrat leads it away with difficulty.

Scene 7

INT—The guest room—Day.

Rasheed enters his tiny home and see his sister Qudsia, with an elderly Latino maid placing a flower vase on the dining table. She turns with a start as Rasheed opens the door.

QUDSIA: I was just . . .

Rasheed walks up to the table and smells the flowers.

RASHEED: Thank you.

QUDSIA: This is Maria . . . our maid.

Maria smiles at him. Qudsia indicates for her to leave . . . she does so.

QUDSIA: I washed and ironed your clothes. And I've put some kebabs in your fridge.

She hesitates.

QUDSIA: I'm sorry you can't eat with us . . . Jamal wouldn't like it . . .

Then she hurriedly adds.

QUDSIA: He's a good man . . . only . . .

RASHEED: You've done enough for me, little sister . . . thank you . . . thank you.

He hugs her and as he does so, he breaks down, Qudsia holds him as he tries to control himself. Then she gently pulls away and touches his face.

QUDSIA: Don't worry . . . everything will be fine . . .

RASHEED: I've been wandering for so long . . . so long . . .

QUDSIA: I know . . . but now you are here . . . everything will be fine . . . I promise you!!

She hugs him again.

Scene 8

INT—A Lebanese café—Day.

Sounds of Arabian music. Rasheed walks in. The manager, forty, at the counter greets him.

MANAGER: Good morning, Sir!

RASHEED: Good morning! You look Iranian . . . are you?

The manager shakes his head.

MANAGER: I'm from Lebanon.

RASHEED: Salaam alaikum.

MANAGER: Wa alaikum as-salaam . . . where are you from?

RASHEED: From Afghanistan!

MANAGER: Oh! Lots of problems there . . . no? Those bearded guys . . . huh?

Rasheed nods.

MANAGER: Are you new here?

RASHEED: Yes.

MANAGER: Then you must be in the graveyard shift.

RASHEED: How do you know?

MANAGER: All newcomers get the graveyard shift . . . what will you have?

RASHEED: Kebabs and some bread, please.

Rasheed moves to a table nearby and sits down.

RASHEED: How long have you been here?

MANAGER: Seven years . . . and you?

RASHEED: One week.

MANAGER: Why did you leave? Ah, never mind . . . those bearded guys are crazy . . .

The manager nods and continues wistfully.

MANAGER: As time goes by, your memories become shorter . . . and then one day . . . boom!

Rasheed looks at him.

MANAGER: You forget your homeland. You become an American!

Rasheed smiles at him.

Scene 9

INT—The gas station—Night.

A family of Mexican-Americans is in the convenience store. A father, mother and two small children. They speak in Spanish. They pick some items off the shelf and the father approaches Rasheed to pay the bill. As he collects the payment, Rasheed looks out of his booth to see Linda standing by her car. She notices him looking at her and waves. He half smiles, waves back, and hands over the change to the man. As the family makes its way to the exit, Rasheed glances out to see Linda hurriedly entering the store. Across the street, the same police patrol car comes to a halt in front of the store. Linda, inside the store, pretends to be shopping. She constantly keeps an eye on the car. Rasheed looks in her direction and she moves closer to the booth.

LINDA: Godddamn dicks!

Linda pretends to examine a carton of milk. She glances out. The patrol car moves away. Linda in a totally affected way waves them goodbye and whispers.

LINDA: Bye, pricks!

Rasheed watches the car move away. Linda continues.

LINDA: They really screw up my work time.

She looks at Rasheed . . . sizes him up.

LINDA: Hey, why don't you and I step in the back and . . . huh?

Rasheed embarrassed, shakes his head.

LINDA: C'mon, there's no one around . . . ten minutes and that's it!

RASHEED: Please madam, it's not the time . . .

LINDA: Then?

Rasheed doesn't know what to say. Linda laughs.

LINDA: Relax . . . I was just kidding . . . you married?

Rasheed hesitates, and then nods.

LINDA: Kids?

Rasheed nods slowly.

RASHEED: A boy . . .

LINDA: So you don't fuck around . . . that's good . . . but I think

you missed a good deal. Ah . . . today's a noluck day.

Linda heads to the restroom. Rasheed glances to the road outside. A tough-looking group of young African-Americans passes by. One young man plays with a basket ball. The sound of the thump as the ball hits the road echoes in the dark night. The group turns a corner. Linda emerges in a fresh dress and heads towards her car. She gets in. The car moves off.

Scene 10

INT—Rasheed's room—Day.

Rasheed is in bed. He tries to sleep, but can't. He gets up distractedly and paces up and down. He hears sounds of laughter and shouts of excitement. He gets up and goes to his little window and peers out. On the back lawns of the big house, he sees his nephew Najib, niece Zarina and a few friends at the pool. Some of them are swimming. While a few others play with a frisbee. There is merriment and laughter. Rasheed moves away from the window and is about to enter the bathroom when there is a knock at the door. He opens it and sees Nusrat, his nephew. Nusrat smiles. So does Rasheed.

NUSRAT: Good morning, Uncle.
RASHEED: Good morning, Nusrat.
NUSRAT: Dad wants to meet you at the house . . .
RASHEED: Meet me?
NUSRAT: Yes, he says it's urgent.
RASHEED I'll be there in 5 minutes.

Scene 11

EXT—The Patio of Jamal's house—Day.

Jamal, and a silver-haired man, Mr Hershovitz, sit at a table. Qudsia, Rasheed's sister, sits some distance away. Rasheed and Nusrat join them. Rasheed is introduced to the visitor.

JAMAL: This is our friend, Mr Hershovitz, an immigration lawyer . . . this is Rasheed Durrani.

The man smiles affably as he shakes Rasheed's hand.

HERSHOVITZ: Hi. So, you are the guy in trouble!

JAMAL: Mr Hershovitz helped us a great deal when we first came here.

HERSHOVITZ: I was talking to Qudsia and Jamal . . . and they were telling me about you . . . you've had a really rough time . . . I'm sorry . . .

Rasheed looks at him and nods.

HERSHOVITZ: You know living out here . . . we never really understand . . . But I'm trying to . . . now can I ask you a question?

Rasheed nods.

HERSHOVITZ: If you go back to Afghanistan, what will happen to you?

RASHEED: I will be shot!

HERSHOVITZ: God, it sounds sadistic, but that's what I need to hear. We will say you are a political refugee from the Taliban . . . and we will build up your case . . . okay?

RASHEED: Yes . . . that is true . . . but I would also like it if you could tell your government as to why we have the Taliban and . . .

JAMAL: Shut up!

NUSRAT: Dad, uncle was just trying to . . .

JAMAL: Nusrat. Mr Hershovitz will do the thinking for him!

Nusrat nods, Rasheed looks at him as Hershovitz continues.

HERSHOVITZ: Look Mr Durrani . . . that won't help.

We are trying to get you asylum status . . . do you understand?

Rasheed nods.

HERSHOVITZ: In the meantime, you have to take some precautions. By that I mean, don't break any laws, be careful when making friends, and keep a low profile. Okay?

Rasheed nods.

ACT III

Scene 1

EXT—Streets—Night.

Rasheed drives to the gas station at night. He passes through the Latino and black neighbourhoods. He sees groups of young people hanging out, occasionally a drunk; a small crowd outside a bar. The entire ambience is one of desolation and impending violence.

Scene 2

EXT—Gas station—Night.

Rasheed enters the store and Manuel hands over the keys to him and smiles. Rasheed smiles too.

RASHEED: Doesn't your son work here too?

Manuel nods

RASHEED: Where is he?

Manuel hesitates and then tears well up in his eyes.

MANUEL: He no work . . . he bad . . . bad.

He indicates as he puts his finger like a syringe to his forearm.

MANUEL: Gun, gang too . . . don't tell boss . . . Okay?

Rasheed nods.

MANEUL: His name Juan . . . he American. He call me and mother from Mexico . . . we come.

RASHEED: And your wife?

MANUEL: She work . . . your house.

RASHEED: Ah!

MANUEL: Tell boss I work hard. Okay?

Rasheed nods and Manuel shuffles out of the store. Rasheed watches him go. Beyond Manuel, Rasheed notices the two black men (Erasmus, twenty-five, and Joe, twenty-three) getting out of their parked car. They saunter over the store. Rasheed enters his booth and sits down observing them. They enter the store and wander around. Erasmus picks up a pack of beer. And then they casually make their way to the exit. Rasheed taps on the pane of his booth. They stop.

RASHEED: You'll have to pay for that . . .

ERASMUS (*sauntering up to Rasheed*): Why? I thought it was free. Ain't it free, Joe?

Joe, from the back, nods.

RASHEED: I'm sorry . . . it is not free.

ERASMUS: It's not free? Hey Joe, he says it's not free! You got any money on you?

Joe walks up to the booth, pretending to check his pockets.

JOE: Let me see . . . Nah . . . I got no money . . . but I got this . . .

Joe puts his hand in his jacket and reveals the butt of a revolver.

ERASMUS: And that cop-eye up there can't see this.

There is a pause. A car comes to a halt outside and Linda gets out. Rasheed and the two men notice it. Rasheed looks at them again.

RASHEED: You will still have to pay . . .

ERASMUS: If we don't?

The two eye him warily. They stare at each other. At this point, Linda enters. They turn to see her. She sees them, senses something is amiss.

LINDA: Hi . . .

The two men nod at her.

LINDA: I just want to use the restroom . . .

ERASMUS: Be my guest . . . Linda . . .

She hurries towards the restroom at the back, turns and stops to see what's happening. Erasmus turns back to Rasheed.

ERASMUS: And if we don't?

RASHEED: Nothing . . . you can go away . . . but, you will be a poor example of a people who I respect.

ERASMUS: What?

RASHEED: There are so many of your people that I admire and

respect.

Both the young men look at him intently.

ERASMUS: Yeah? Like who?

RASHEED: Paul Robeson.

JOE: Who's he?

RASHEED: A great man. And a great singer. You should read about him.

ERASUMS: You heard that, Joe? We should read about him! (He *turns to Rasheed*) Who else?

RASHEED: Martin Luther King . . . Muhammad Ali . . .

ERASMUS: That was easy . . . who else?

RASHEED: Malcolm X . . . Angela Davis . . .

JOE: Who's she?

RASHEED: A fighter . . . and a thinker. Now will you please pay?

The two look at him, Linda watches. Then Erasmus puts his hand in his pocket, pulls out some cash and hands it to Rasheed.

ERASUMS: Just checking you out man . . . keep the change!

RASHEED: Thank you . . . gentlemen.

Rasheed bows and puts his right hand to his heart. The two men turn and walk away.

RASHEED: Do you want the bill?

Erasmus looks back at Rasheed.

ERASMUS: Nah, and we ain't no gentlemen . . .

They exit. Linda walks up to the booth.

LINDA: That was cool! That was really cool!

Rasheed counts the money.

LINDA: How do you know about all those people?

RASHEED: I've read their work.

LINDA: No kiddin'! Yeah?

Rasheed puts his money in the till and picks up a book and starts reading. Linda looks at him, intrigued.

LINDA: What exactly did you do in Af-ghan-istan?

RASHEED: I was a teacher, madam.

LINDA: In a school?

RASHEED: No . . . at university.

LINDA: Wow! A Professor! What are you doing in this dump?

Rasheed keeps silent.

LINDA: Are you going to tell me or not?

RASHEED: Please madam, no more questions . . .

LINDA: Asshole! Oh my God, I forgot I've got to use the restroom!

She hurries towards the restroom door. Rasheed glances out, and sees a car stop in front of Erasmus and Joe.

Some kind of an exchange is made. The car drives off. Linda emerges from the restroom and hurriedly leaves. She waves to Erasmus and Joe. They wave back. She gets into her car and drives off. Rasheed glances at the clock. It is 11.45 pm.

RASHEED: What am I doing here?

Scene 3

EXT/INT—Flashback # 2—Day/Night.

Footage of the Taliban forces entering Kabul. People watch as the tanks enter. Shots of bodies hanging from lampposts. Summary executions. Bus loads of refugees entering Iran/Pakistan. We see Rasheed among them.

Scene 4

INT—Rasheed's room—Day.

He is making tea. He hears a cat mew. He glances at the back door. Goes out and opens it. He sees a cat sitting outside and smiles.

RASHEED: Oh . . . a visitor!

He goes back to his room, fills a saucer with milk and rushes back. He places it on the floor in front of the cat, who slurps it up hungrily. Rasheed shuts the door and enters his room, and goes back to making his tea. Nusrat, his nephew enters quietly. Rasheed sees him.

NUSRAT: Good morning Uncle. Can I come in?

RASHEED: Of course, Nusrat! Would you like a cup of tea?

NUSRAT: Thank you . . . yes!

Rasheed pours the tea into two mugs and brings them to the table. They both settle down.

RASHEED: Tell me . . .

NUSRAT: What exactly did you teach at university?

RASHEED: Central Asian history.

NUSRAT: I'm sure there are schools here that would be interested in offering you a job. Let's write to them.

RASHEED: You really think so?

NUSRAT: Why not give it a shot? Come on Uncle . . .

RASHEED: I would love to teach again . . .

NUSRAT: Good. Now if you write out your details . . . I could get a printout and mail it . . . then, who knows? Anything can happen!

RASHEED: I'll do that, Thank you.

NUSRAT: Don't mention it. I always have great ideas.

Rasheed smiles at him.

RASHEED: What are *you* studying at university?

NUSRAT: Electronics and . . .guess what? Poetry!

RASHEED: Wonderful!

NUSRAT: You really think so?

RASHEED: Of course! Poetry! The world of Firdausi, Hafez and Saadi!

NUSRAT: Who are they?

RASHEED: The epic poets of Central Asia . . . eloquent . . . magnificent . . . baroque! In Western musical terms, Mozart, Wagner, Beethoven!

Nusrat looks at him and smiles.

NUSRAT: They sound great!

He finishes his tea, gets up.

NUSRAT: I'll look them up in the library.

Nusrat moves to the door, but is stopped by Rasheed's voice.

RASHEED: Nusrat . . .

Nusrat turns.

RASHEED: Remember son, you don't look them up . . . you have to arrive at them.

NUSRAT: Touché!

Rasheed smiles. Nusrat smiles too and leaves.

Scene 5

INT—Gas station—Night.

Rasheed drives into the gas station. He sees Linda inside the store. He parks the car and enters.

LINDA: I've been waiting for you . . . professor!

RASHEED: You have?

Manuel walks over and hands him the keys.

LINDA: Yeah. Goodnight Manuel.

MANUEL: Good night Linda, my love.

He smiles and leaves. Linda walks up to Rasheed.

LINDA: I've got something very important to ask you.

RASHEED: I'm sorry . . . but I have to work.

LINDA: C'mon, there's no one around . . .

RASHEED: What about your . . . work?

LINDA: I got a regular. He comes quick and pays quick. Tonight's an early night. So?

Rasheed hesitates, then nods. They enter the booth, Rasheed sits down. Linda pulls up a chair.

LINDA: Okay . . . first question . . . you legal?

Rasheed is taken aback.

RASHEED: Yes . . . why do you ask?

She takes a deep breath.

LINDA: You don't look it . . . you don't look it . . . and I'm not dumb.

RASHEED: Look, I have work to do . . . so . . .

LINDA: I was talking to my friend Emma, she's been to college and all that . . . and I told her you're from Afghan- is-tan . . . and you know what she said?

Rasheed doesn't answer.

LINDA: She said there's a whole bunch of terrorists out there.

Rasheed shrugs his shoulders. Linda watches him.

LINDA: Is it true?
RASHEED: Please . . . I don't want to talk about it . . .
LINDA: And she said they were *verrry* smart people.

Rasheed's face tightens up.

RASHEED: Your friend is intelligent . . .
LINDA: She also said they could be anywhere . . . even here.
RASHEED: Perhaps.
LINDA: How do I know you are not a terrorist?
RASHEED: Do I look like one?
LINDA: How do I know what they look like? Are you?
RASHEED: Shut up foolish woman!

Linda recoils and stands up.

LINDA: Don't yell at me!
RASHEED: I'm tired of this conversation!
LINDA: Who do you think you are? You think you can yell at me? Huh? Hell you can't . . . this is a goddamn free country . . .
RASHEED: You want to know about terrorists? You want to know? They shot my wife, woman! *They shot my wife*! *And when my son tried to protect her, they shot him too . . . they destroyed my life*!
LINDA: I'm . . .

Rasheed calms down and his voice drops to a whisper.

RASHEED: This story, your friend does not know . . . now leave me alone . . .

Linda stands and looks dazed. She then quickly leaves the booth. Rasheed watches her go. She steps out and reaches her car with her back to the booth. She turns round to look at Rasheed once more, then gets into her car and drives off. Rasheed gets up in his booth and restlessly steps out of it. He paces about, then slams the door of his booth in anger. He looks across the road where Erasmus and Joe hang out. Suddenly a speeding car appears and screeches past the two men. He hears abuses being screamed in Spanish as Erasmus and Joe duck and pull out their weapons. The car disappears round the corner. Erasmus and Joe laugh.

Scene 6

INT—Rasheed's room—Day.

Nusrat is at a laptop computer and printer. He is busy getting Rasheed's CV printed out. Rasheed examines the copy.

RASHEED: Do you think it will work?

NUSRAT: I'm sure it will!

He picks up one copy of the CV and reads from it.

NUSRAT: A Ph.D. in history . . . papers presented in
Beijing, Cairo, Moscow, Amsterdam! Wow! Your future's looking up, Uncle!

Rasheed laughs. Nusrat starts putting the CVs into envelopes.

NUSRAT: This goes to Berkeley . . . and this to Santa Cruz. Uncle . . . how come the Taliban got to where they did?

He looks at Rasheed enquiringly.

NUSRAT: I mean, are they for real? When I ask dad, he just sort of clams up . . .

RASHEED: It's a long story, Nusrat. But why do you want to know?

NUSRAT: I don't know . . . sometimes I feel ashamed . . .

RASHEED: Of being a Muslim?

Nusrat nods.

RASHEED: Well son, let me tell you something that will cheer you up. We didn't invent apartheid. We didn't invent germ warfare. We didn't start the world wars or the holocaust. We didn't have gulags. We were not in Vietnam. Nor did we bomb Hiroshima. Does that make you feel better?

Nusrat smiles and so does Rasheed. There is a knock on the door. Rasheed opens it to find Zarina, his niece standing outside.

RASHEED: Ah Zarina! Come in, come in . . .

ZARINA: There's some lady to meet you.

RASHEED: To meet me?

ZARINA: Yes. I asked her to wait outside.

Rasheed puts on his coat and leaves with her.

Scene 8

EXT—Outside the gate of Jamal's house—Day.

Rasheed and Zarina come out of the gate to find Linda next to her car.

RASHEED: Linda!

LINDA: Hi!

RASHEED: What brings you here?

LINDA: It's Sunday! Thought I'd take you on a spin around the city.

RASHEED: But how did you find . . . this is my niece, Zarina. This is Linda.

They shake hands. Zarina does so formally.

LINDA: So? It'll be for a couple of hours . . . you coming?

Rasheed hesitates.

LINDA: You don't have to. If you don't want to.

RASHEED: I . . . all right . . . Zarina, could you tell Nusrat that . . .

Zarina nods, turns and goes inside the house.

LINDA: Snot-nosed . . . bitch!

Rasheed looks surprised.

LINDA: Kept me waiting outside!

RASHEED: Ah! I apologize for her bad manners.

Linda gets into the car. So does Rasheed.

LINDA: I bet the house is plush.

RASHEED: I think so.

LINDA: You think so? You don't know?

RASHEED: No, I stay at the back.

Linda looks at him.

LINDA: Aha . . .

They drive off.

Scene 9

EXT—Rasheed and Linda in the car—Day.

RASHEED: How did you find my address?

LINDA: I asked Manuel and he said you lived with the boss!

RASHEED: He is my brother-in-law. My sister's husband.
LINDA: What does he do?
RASHEED: Well, I think he owns gas stations, motels, and a carpet business . . .
LINDA: So he's a big shit, big shot!
Rasheed laughs softly. Linda looks at him and smiles too.
LINDA: That was pretty good, huh? Big shit, big shot!
They drive past a Latino neighbourhood.
LINDA: See the nightclub, there?
Rasheed sees a shady little club at a corner. A few people stand outside it
LINDA: That's where Dan used to take me dancing every Saturday night . . . that is, before he started beating me up.
RASHEED: Dan?
LINDA: My ex-husband. Hey professor, do they beat up women in Af-ghan-is-tan?
RASHEED: I think all over the world men beat up women.
LINDA (*imitating*): I think all over the world men beat up women.
Then back in her own accent.
LINDA: Did you beat up your wife? I am sorry . . . I'm sorry . . .
RASHEED: No . . . it's all right . . . I didn't beat her . . .
LINDA: How come?
RASHEED: She was stronger than me.
Linda laughs out loud. Rasheed smiles too.
RASHEED: When did you get married?
LINDA: Right after high school. I was eighteen, Dan was eighteen. Two years later, Kate came along!
RASHEED: Kate?
LINDA: My daughter . . . three years later Rory came with a big howl!
RASHEED: You have two children?
LINDA: Yeah.
RASHEED: And Dan? What does he do?
LINDA: Who knows? We split up four years ago. He couldn't hold a job, got drunk most of the time . . .
RASHEED: Where is he now?

LINDA: Somewhere! Deep in the heart of Texas!

Pause.

LINDA: The one good thing was that I got the house from him . . . but I gotta pay the mortgage.

RASHEED: So that's why you . . .

LINDA: This is where the Koreans are . . . hard working bunch of people.

Rasheed looks at the neighbourhood.

LINDA: Work! Work! Work! Ever eaten Korean food?

RASHEED: Never.

LINDA: Love their food! But I don't understand their wobbly music!

RASHEED: Wobbly music?

LINDA: Yeah . . . it sort of wobbles . . . you know . . . like it's kinda drunk!

Rasheed laughs. They approach a diner. As the car pulls up to it, Linda explains to Rasheed.

LINDA: Now . . . here is where I work and here is where we'll eat.

RASHEED: You work here?

LINDA: Yup! From 8 in the morning to 2. Monday to Saturday.

RASHEED: But then . . . why do you . . .

LINDA: Hey, come on, man from Afghan-is-tan. This is America! You got to have status. Take a look at my car . . . look at this dress! Do you think a waitress could afford this . . . and also pay a mortgage! Huh?

Rasheed nods, Linda gets out of the car. So does Rasheed.

Scene 10

INT—In the diner—Day.

Linda enters followed by Rasheed. The man at the counter greets her.

MAN: Hi Sue!

LINDA: Hi Marty!

ANOTHER WAITRESS: Morning, Sue!

LINDA: Hi Christine!

Rasheed looks confused. As they settle down at a table, he asks softly.

RASHEED: Sue?

LINDA: Oh my God, I forgot to tell you! My name is Susan! Only in the night, it's Linda. You understand?

Rasheed nods, Christine comes to take their order.

LINDA: Okay, what will you have Rasheed? This is Rasheed . . . from Afghan-is-tan . . . and that's Christine.

CHRISTINE: Hi! What'll you have?

RASHEED: Some coffee please!

LINDA: Hey, it's on me! I get a kickback here!

RASHEED: I've had breakfast . . .

LINDA: Sure? . . .Okay. I'll have a chicken sandwich.

CHRISTINE: And lots of mayonnaise . . .

LINDA: Right!

CHRISTINE: And fries on the side.

LINDA: Right!

CHRISTINE: Got it!

She leaves. Rasheed leans forward.

RASHEED: So that is why you leave early every night!

LINDA: Yeah . . . 9 to 12. Just like Cinderella. Then get a good night's sleep. Look great in the morning. Get the kids to school. Get to work. Back home by half past two, nap for an hour. Pick up the kids by 4. Play with them. Feed them. Tuck them in by 8, back to work at 9. Monday to Saturday, pretty hectic, huh?

Rasheed looks at her in wonder and nods. Linda leans forward and whispers.

LINDA: Once I did something stupid. Really stupid! See this mark here?

She shows her left wrist to Rasheed. There's a slash on it.

LINDA: Tried to kill myself. But Kate came into the room. When I saw her face, I didn't want to die. That's when I decided—what the hell . . . I'll be Linda.

RASHEED: Does anybody know about . . . Linda?

LINDA: Only Emma . . .she's my best friend.

RASHEED: And the children?

LINDA: I've told them I have a part-time job . . . and don't look at me like that! Sometimes you have to lie a little.
RASHEED: Why did you come to see me?
LINDA: Aha! Because . . . you look kinda lonely . . . like you need fresh air . . .

Rasheed looks at her closely.

LINDA: . . . and also to tell you you're not the only guy with problems.

Rasheed smiles and puts his right hand to his heart.

LINDA: Hey, what does that mean? I seen you do that before!
RASHEED: The man from Afghanistan says thank you!

Christine comes in with the order.

LINDA: Okay, no more talking. I'm hungry!

Scene 11

EXT—Linda and Rasheed in the car—Day.

They drive into a middle-class neighbourhood and come to a halt in front of the modest house. Linda gets out of the car as two children, Kate, a girl of ten and Rory, a boy of seven, with an elderly woman, Emma, sixtyish, in tow, rush out to greet her.

KATE: Hi Mom!
RORY: Hi Mom!

Linda takes them both into her arms and squeezes them tight.

LINDA: Hi kids. I'm back! Hi Emma!

Rasheed gets out of the car and watches them.

LINDA: This is Rasheed. Rasheed, this is my friend Emma, she lives next door . . . and this Kate . . . and Rory.
RASHEED: (*formally shakes their hands and bows*): Good afternoon.
LINDA: Come on kids! We're going to the park and then we'll drop Rasheed home! Bye Emma, and thanks a lot!
EMMA: You're welcome . . . and Sir, I'm sorry about what I said to Sue.
RASHEED: About what?

EMMA: About terrorists . . .
RASHEED: Ah . . . madam, your apology is accepted!

Linda gets into the car. The kids pile into the back. Rasheed sits up front with Linda. They drive off.

Scene 12

EXT—In the car—Day.

KATE: Mom said you are from Af-ghan-is-tan?
RASHEED: That is right!
LINDA: Now remember kids, you gotta say good things about Af-ghan-is-tan . . . or he'll get mad!

Linda smiles at Rasheed and winks. Rasheed smiles.

LINDA: Now let's say it all together! Af-ghan-is-tan is great!
KATE and RORY (*in chorus*): Af-ghan-is-tan is great!

Rasheed smiles.

RORY: Where is Af-ghan-is-tan?
RASHEED: Far away son, very far away! I'll show it to you on the map one day.
KATE: You speak funny!
LINDA: Kate!
RASHEED: No . . . she is right . . . We don't speak English in Afghanistan.
RORY: You don't speak English? Wow!

They drive for a while.

RORY: Do you like mom?
LINDA: Hey . . . cut it out . . . Rory . . . what do you expect him to say . . . huh? That he hates me . . .? I'm sorry Rasheed, these kids are . . . Jesus!

There is silence.

KATE: Are you married?
LINDA: Oh my God! Give the man a break, kids . . . give him a break!

Scene 13

EXT—In the park—Day.

Rasheed and Linda sit on a park bench as Kate and Rory play a game of catch. Linda glances around the crowded park and puts on a pair of dark glasses. Rasheed notices it.

RASHEED: Do you come here often with the children?

LINDA: Every Sunday . . . come hail, storm . . . or quake!

RASHEED: Those two men at the gas station . . . what are they to you?

LINDA: Ras and Joe? It's their turf . . . they let me hang out. Sometimes I got to pay them in kind . . . and that's it.

Rory chases Kate, as he catches up with her, he tugs at her dress and trips her up. When she falls, he collapses on top of her, shrieking with delight. Kate calls out to Linda.

KATE: Mommy! He's hurting me!

Linda moves towards the kids, screaming.

LINDA: Rory, stop it! Stop it! How many times have I told you, don't be rough with her! How many times?

Rory, alarmed at Linda's tone, rushes to her and buries his head in her lap.

RORY: Mommy, don't yell at me!

Linda hugs him and punctuates her words with kisses.

LINDA: I'm sorry, sorry, sorry, baby! Mummy loves you honey.

As she apologizes, she notices Rasheed is watching her. She kisses Rory and sends him off to play. Linda returns and sits down. She takes out a bottle of pills from her bag and swallows few hurriedly.

RASHEED: What is that?

LINDA: For my cold.

RASHEED: Can I see it?

LINDA: I said it was for my cold, didn't I? Don't look at me like that! I'm a good mother . . . I try goddamn hard to be one . . . you understand? So no more educated shit from you.

She turns her head away. After a pause she turns back.

LINDA: You want to talk about yourself?

RASHEED: No . . .
LINDA: You sure? Get things off your chest?
Rasheed shakes his head.
LINDA: Jeez! Here I am trying to . . . anyway . . . no sweat! Just take in the sun.
She leans her head against the park bench.

Scene 14

EXT—At the gate of Jamal's house—Day.
Linda's car arrives at the gate of Jamal's house. Rasheed gets off.
RASHEED: Thank you . . . Susan. Children, it was a great honour to meet you!
LINDA: Bye Rasheed!
RASHEED: Thank you, Susan!
She drives off.

Scene 15

INT—Rasheed's room—Night.
Rasheed places a saucer of milk for the cat behind his room. He then enters his room. There is a knock on the door. Rasheed opens it. It's Jamal.
RASHEED: Jamal . . . do come in.
JAMAL: I was told a lady came to meet you here in the afternoon?
RASHEED: Yes.
JAMAL: Where did you meet her?
RASHEED: At the gas station.
JAMAL: She comes there regularly?
Rasheed nods.
JAMAL: At what time?
RASHEED: In the . . . night . . . she . . .
JAMAL: You know what that means?

Rasheed nods.

JAMAL: So, you went out with a prostitute!

Rasheed is silent.

JAMAL: I've worked hard to earn the respect of my neighbours. See that she doesn't come here again.

Rasheed nods slowly. Jamal leaves. Rasheed shuts the door. He moves towards his bed and sits down on it.

ACT IV

Scene 1

EXT—Park—Day.
Rasheed sits in a park and observes the people there. He sees a group of three old African-Americans. One is playing a trumpet and the other two tap dancing and doing a shuffle. They laugh as they dance, clap their hands, tap their knees and heels, try intricate steps. They are having a great time with each other as a group of youngsters watch them. Some of the kids attempt the dance. As they do, the old men encourage them and help them along. Rasheed observes them.

Flashback. A quick cut to a house in Afghanistan where we see Rasheed's wife and son dance the Atan. Friends, men and women, stand around and clap and encourage them on. Rasheed is among them as mother and son whirl and laugh.

Scene 2

EXT—Rasheed in the car—Day.
He drives up to the diner where Linda works. He sees her talking and smiling as she serves and takes orders.
Rasheed smiles to himself. At one point, she glances out and is surprised to see Rasheed sitting in his car. She waves to him. Rasheed is embarrassed. He waves and drives off.

Scene 3

INT—Lebanese cafe—Evening.

Rasheed is finishing his meal. A few other customers sit at various tables. The manager sits at his counter. Rasheed walks up to him.

MANAGER: How was the meal?

RASHEED: Very good . . .

MANAGER: And the kebabs?

RASHEED: Good . . .

MANAGER: That does not sound very convincing. I suppose you believe that the best kebabs are made in Afghanistan.

Rasheed smiles.

MANAGER: Okay . . . I believe you . . . but!

He raises his finger.

MANAGER; Our women are more beautiful!

They both laugh.

MANAGER: And, we can even see them! Where is your family?

Rasheed hesitates.

MANAGER: Ah . . . never mind, I ask stupid questions. Salaam alaikum!

RASHEED: Wa alaikum as-salaam!

Rasheed leaves.

Scene 4

INT—Gas station—Night.

Rasheed is in the store doing a checklist. He turns to see Erasmus and Joe enter. They saunter in.

ERASMUS: Hey Brainman!

Rasheed looks at them and smiles. Erasmus holds out a book to Rasheed.

ERASMUS: This was my old man's. Been lying in the house . . . thought maybe you might . . .

Rasheed takes the book and reads the title.

RASHEED: *Soul on Ice*! Wonderful book! I read it years ago!

ERASMUS: Oh . . . then maybe . . .

He stretches his hand out to take the book back.

RASHEED: No! No! I would love to read it again. There was a beautiful passage I remember . . .

Rasheed flies though the pages.

RASHEED: Aha! Here it is!

He begins reading.

RASHEED: We shall have our manhood. We shall have it or the earth will be levelled by our attempts to gain it.

ERASUMS: I hear that man!

RASHEED: Yes, those were different times. You know, I remember reading this passage years ago and I was amazed by the power of those words. Where is your father?

Erasmus shrugs his shoulders and smiles. Rasheed nods and stretches out his hand.

RASHEED: My name is Rasheed.

ERASMUS: I'm Erasmus. And he's Joe.

They shake hands.

RASHEED: What do both of you do?

Erasmus and Joe look at each other, then smile at Rasheed.

JOE: You'll stay healthy if you don't know . . .

RASHEED: But I can guess . . .

ERASMUS: That's why we call you Brainman!

He and Joe laugh. A sound makes them look outside. Both Erasmus and Joe reach for weapons but relax when they see Linda get out of a car. It drives off and Linda enters the store.

LINDA: Hi!

She walks up to Rasheed.

LINDA: What were you doing outside my work?

RASHEED: I was just er . . .

LINDA: Why didn't you come in?

RASHEED: I wasn't hungry.

Linda looks at him and then smiles slyly.

LINDA: Aha! You were hungry for me . . . right?

Rasheed looks embarrassed as Joe and Erasmus smile. Linda continues.

LINDA: Come on . . . come on . . . you were hungry for me, right?

Erasmus and Joe burst out laughing as Linda ruffles Rasheed's hair

and heads for the restroom.

ERASUMS: Come on Brainman . . . say it . . . you were hungry for her . . . come on . . . I seen you looking at her . . .

Joe laughs loudly. Rasheed smiles and shakes his head. As the banter goes on, Joe looks out at the road.

JOE: Hey, Ras . . . look at that car.

He looks at a car parked some distance away in the dark.

ERASUMS: That's a new one.

Rasheed looks at it too. The car starts up, takes a turn and drives off.

ERASUMS: That ain't a cop car . . . that's . . . hey Brainman, maybe it's for you.

Rasheed is tense as the two of them laugh. Erasmus notices Rasheed's tension and turns to him.

ERASMUS: Relax Brainman, maybe it's for us.

JOE: Yeah . . . we got the whole fucking government up our asses!

Rasheed smiles as Linda emerges from the restroom and deliberately walks sexily past the three of them.

LINDA: Bye guys . . .

She turns to blow a kiss to them. Erasmus and Joe whoop as she gets to her car and drives off.

Scene 5

INT—Rasheed's room—Day.

Rasheed sits in his room watching an entertainment programme on the television. There is a knock on the door. He gets up and opens it as his sister Qudsia enters with a tray of food.

QUDSIA: Salaam alaikum . . . good morning!

RASHEED: Wa alaikum as-salaam.

She heads for the refrigerator and begins putting the food in. Rasheed watches her.

QUDSIA: Nusrat has mailed your papers to six colleges . . . he feels that at least two should be interested. Isn't that good?

RASHEED: Yes.

QUDSIA: Who is she?
RASHEED: Who?
QUDSIA: The lady who comes to see you . . .
RASHEED: So . . . you've heard of her.
Qudsia shuts the refrigerator and turns to him.
QUDSIA: Yes . . .
RASHEED: And what is it?
QUDSIA: Don't let anybody tell you who to meet and who not to.
Rasheed is surprised.
QUDSIA: But . . . be careful. (*Pause*) Is she . . . a . . .
Rasheed nods.
QUDSIA: Have you . . .?
Rasheed laughs and walks to her and hugs her.
RASHEED: No I have not.
QUDSIA: Is she a nice person?
RASHEED: I think so.
QUDSIA: Do you like her.
Rasheed laughs.
RASHEED: Too many questions, little sister. Too many questions.
QUDSIA: When there is another human being in your life . . . the pain becomes less.

Scene 6

EXT/INT—Streets and Linda's diner—Day.
Rasheed drives to Linda's diner. He parks the car and enters it. Linda spots him and smiles.
LINDA: Hi Rasheed!
Rasheed smiles.
RASHEED: See? I found the courage to enter . . .
He sits at a table.
LINDA: What'll you have?
RASHEED: Some shaami kebabs and coffee please?

LINDA: What?! What kebabs??
RASHEED: Shaami kebabs . . . with mustard and onions!
LINDA: Come on professor . . . You know we don't have that.
RASHEED: Oh well then, I shall have to eat your mediocre cheeseburger!
LINDA: Oh ho! I see you got a sense of humour!

Then she announces loftily.

LINDA: The cheeseburger is America's gift to the world!
RASHEED: Is it?
LINDA: Yup

Rasheed smiles.

RASHEED: Okay, I will accept it. So, can I have America's gift to the world with some coffee, please?

Linda laughs.

LINDA: You got it!

She moves away, goes behind the counter, to place the order. She looks in the direction of Rasheed. He is tapping his fingers on the table and humming a tune.

LINDA: Hey Professor? Are you singing?
RASHEED: Yes Susan. Today, I am happy!
LINDA: Hallelujah!

Scene 7

EXT—Outside Linda's diner—Day.

Rasheed and Linda walk towards Linda's car. Linda glances at her watch.

LINDA: Okay . . . tell me, why are you happy today?
RASHEED: Because things are looking up in my life . . . so I would like to take you out . . .
LINDA: What?
RASHEED: I mean if it's all right with you . . .

Linda looks at him surprised. Rasheed smiles.

LINDA: You want to take me out on a date?

RASHEED: Yes.

Linda looks at him curiously.

LINDA: You must be . . . you mean it?

RASHEED: Yes.

LINDA: Why?

RASHEED: Because maybe you need some fresh air.

Linda smiles.

LINDA: That's my line . . .Okay . . . but you'll have to ask me.

RASHEED: Ask you what!

LINDA: You'll have to ask me out . . . nice and proper.

RASHEED: Ah! All right. Susan. Will you go out on a date with me?

LINDA: Yes . . . when?

RASHEED: On Sunday?

LINDA: That's day after . . . what time?

RASHEED: Eight o'clock?

LINDA: That will be fine!

She begins walking. Rasheed follows.

LINDA: Okay, we got that out of the way. I know a great place.

RASHEED: Good!

LINDA: And don't worry, it's not too expensive.

Linda stops next to her car and smiles at Rasheed.

LINDA: Thanks for asking me out . . .

She smiles and gets into her car and drives off. Rasheed watches her.

Scene 8

INT—Rasheed's room—Night.

Rasheed is making tea in his room. He picks up his cup and moves to the sofa and settles down on it. He glances at the photograph of his wife, son and himself on the side table. He looks at the photograph intently.

Scene 9

EXT/INT—Linda's house—Night.

Rasheed drives up to the Linda's house. He is wearing a coat and a tie. He walks up to the front door and rings the bell. Emma, the elderly lady, opens it.

EMMA: Good evening Rasheed. Come in . . . come in!

Rasheed enters the house. Kate and Rory peep at him from the door of their room. Emma, seeing them, shoos them in.

EMMA Come on, kids . . . bedtime!

She closes the door of the room and returns to him smiling.

EMMA: They are so excited . . .

RASHEED: Where is Susan?

EMMA: She'll be out soon . . . you know it's been such a long time since she's been out like this?

Linda emerges from her room. She looks stunning, but also a bit shy. Rasheed looks at her and smiles.

RASHEED: Good evening . . . Susan.

LINDA: Good evening . . . how do I look?

EMMA: Great!

Linda smiles.

LINDA: Shall we leave.

Rasheed nods. Linda heads to the front door with Rasheed. As he reaches it, he turns to look at the children's door once more. They are both peeping out and smiling. On being seen by Rasheed, they quickly shut the door. Rasheed smiles and then joins Linda.

LINDA: Bye Emma . . . and thank you!

EMMA: Have a nice time!

Linda and Rasheed head towards his car. As they do, Linda opens her purse, takes out some money and puts into Rasheed's pocket.

RASHEED: Susan . . . please . . . I cannot.

Linda smiles at him.

LINDA: Come on, Professor . . . let's share the evening, huh?

They both get into his car.

Scene 10

INT—Nightclub—Night.

It is a fairly large nightclub. There is loud music playing as people dance furiously on the tiny dance floor. The crowd is mainly Latinos with a sprinkling of whites. We see Rasheed and Linda at a table. One empty bottle of red wine is on the table. The second is half full. Linda, slightly tipsy, finishes her meal and takes a sip from her glass. She looks at Rasheed and smiles.

LINDA: Come on . . . time for dancing.

She gets up unsteadily and holds out her hand to him.

RASHEED: Susan, I can't.

LINDA: Come on, Professor . . . don't worry!

Rasheed takes hold of her outstretched hand and lets her lead him to the crowded dance floor. Linda dances around him, with abandon.

LINDA: Just relax . . . let your body relax . . . shut your eyes . . .

Rasheed shuts his eyes and dances. Linda laughs.

LINDA: See . . . it's so easy . . .

RASHEED: Yes . . .

Linda shuts her eyes.

LINDA: You know something Rasheed! You're my mystery man!

RASHEED: Why?

LINDA: You seem like a guy with some deep, dark secrets . . . deep, dark secrets.

She whirls around and does a provocative step.

LINDA: Do you think I'm sexy . . . Professor?

RASHEED: Yes . . . I think so.

LINDA: You do? You really do?

Rasheed nods.

LINDA: I think you're sexy too. You know what we are? A sexy professor with his sexy girl.

Linda moves close and holds him.

LINDA: Isn't this better?

Rasheed seems awkward.

LINDA: Isn't it?

Rasheed nods.

LINDA: But you're feeling guilty!

Rasheed nods, Linda stops dancing and looks at him thoughtfully.

LINDA: You can't forget her, can you?

Rasheed doesn't answer.

LINDA: When did it happen?

RASHEED: Six years ago.

Linda heads back to their table unsteadily and picks up her glass of wine and heads back. She takes a large sip and attempts to dance, loses her balance. Rasheed holds her and escorts her back to the table and gently helps her sit down.

LINDA: I think I'm drunk . . . but hey Professor, I've got a plan for you.

Rasheed sits down next to her.

LINDA: I think I got a *great* plan for you.

RASHEED: A plan for me?

LINDA: Yup. You know what? You can marry me and turn legal.

Rasheed looks at her surprised.

LINDA: I know you're not legal . . . right?

Rasheed hesitates.

LINDA: C'mon, I'm not dumb . . . right?

Rasheed nods.

LINDA: And you want to stay here, right?

Rasheed nods.

LINDA: So? We get married! I mean it . . . no questions asked. After that we can split . . .

Rasheed keeps looking at her.

RASHEED: I don't know what to say, Susan.

LINDA: Am I talking too much?

RASHEED: No . . . no.

LINDA: I think I am . . . I'm drunk. Can we go home . . .?

Rasheed nods.

RASHEED: Thank you for the offer.

Scene 11

EXT—Rasheed's car/Linda's home—Night.

Rasheed drives Linda home in his car. She has her eyes shut. Rasheed occasionally glances in her direction as he drives. The car comes to a halt outside her house. Rasheed gets out and helps Linda. She holds on to him as he escorts her to her door. She opens her purse, takes out her keys, opens the door and then turns to face Rasheed.

LINDA: Thank you . . . Rasheed.

They look at each other.

RASHEED: I must thank you Susan.

LINDA: Good night . . .

She shuts the door. Rasheed turns and walks slowly back to his car.

ACT V

Scene 1

INT—Rasheed's room—Early morning.

Rasheed lies in his bed asleep. There is a knock on his door. He sleeps on. The knocking gets louder and Rasheed gets up and opens the door to find Nusrat, his nephew, standing outside. Nusrat seems distraught.

NUSRAT: Please come to the house . . . quickly . . . Dad wants you there.

RASHEED: What's happened, son?

NUSRAT: Something horrible . . . please come quickly.

Nusrat leaves. Rasheed watches him go.

Scene 2

INT—Jamal's house—Later in the morning.

Jamal is talking to Rasheed earnestly on the patio, as the rest of the family anxiously watch the news on television in the living room.

JAMAL: There was a terrorist attack in New York and Washington . . . about half an hour ago . . . bastards . . . bastards . . .

Rasheed looks at the rest of the family watching the news in horror as the images of the attack appear. Jamal's voice is cautious.

JAMAL: They attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon . . . God! . . . They just flew the aircraft in . . . madmen . . . bastards . . . God! . . .

Rasheed looks at the distant images, and at the faces of his sister, Qudsia, and his nephews. Zarina is crying and Nusrat is trying to

console her.

JAMAL: I just hope they're not . . . if they are . . . then everyone will be suspect.

Rasheed looks at Jamal, who continues.

JAMAL: Everyone . . . all that I've built up . . . do you know what it means? Oh my God . . . you have to meet Mr Hershovitz. Find out from him what you have to do now.

Rasheed nods.

Scene 3

INT—Hershovitz's office—Day.

Hershovitz is speaking angrily as Rasheed listens.

HERSHOVITZ: We'll get them . . . we'll get them! You know, Mr Durrani. I used to feel sympathy for refugees . . . Not anymore . . . not any more.

Rasheed looks at him and nods.

RASHEED: Yes . . . I can understand . . . I'm sorry . . .

HERSHOVITZ: You're sorry? They've blasted the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, taking thousands of innocent lives and you're sorry? There'll be an investigation, but I'm damn sure right now, that the sons of bitches who did this sick act, come from somewhere in your neighbourhood.

Rasheed looks at him.

RASHEED: How does this affect my case?

HERSHOVITZ: It destroys it! As it is, I had one arm tied behind my back . . . Now . . . just lie low . . . and give me time to think.

Scene 4

EXT—Streets—Day.

Rasheed walks down a street in a Latino neighbourhood. He seems to be in deep thought. As he walks, a drunk old Latino approaches him.

DRUNK (*in Spanish*): Got some money, friend?
RASHEED: Sorry, sir, what did you say?
DRUNK (*in Spanish*): Got some money, friend?
RASHEED: I don't speak Spanish . . . sir.
DRUNK: Ah! Okay . . . some money friend. We go . . . to bar . . . and . . . have a drink, no? Terrible . . . New York . . . Washington.
RASHEED: I'm sorry . . . no money.

The drunk stops as Rasheed walks on.

DRUNK: What the fuck!! . . . Why no money!!

He starts yelling now, as Rasheed moves on.

DRUNK: You fucking paisan!! Why no money!! Huh? Why no money?

Rasheed walks on.

Scene 5

EXT/INT—Streets/Diner—Day.

Rasheed drives up to the diner where Linda works. People are watching the news as they eat. Some of them stare at Rasheed. Rasheed looks for Linda. He doesn't see her. He sees Christine, the other waitress, and stops her.

RASHEED: Good morning . . . madam.

Christine looks at him warily.

RASHEED: I'm Rasheed . . .
CHRISTINE: Yeah . . . I know . . . the guy from Afghanistan . . .
RASHEED: Where is Susan?
CHRISTINE: She's taken the day off!

Christine walks away abruptly. Rasheed stands awkwardly and then he turns and leaves.

Scene 6

EXT/INT—Linda's home—Day.

Rasheed drives up to Linda's home and gets out, and rings her door bell. Linda opens the door. She looks flustered and has a bruise on her face.

LINDA: Rasheed? Hi . . . I'm sorry . . . I . . .

RASHEED: What happened to you?

A man, about thirty appears from behind her and stares at him. He drinks from a can of beer and stares at Rasheed.

LINDA: This is Dan.

Rasheed looks at him, at Linda and back to him.

RASHEED: Did you hit her?

DAN: What if I did? Who the fuck are you?

Before he knows it, Rasheed slaps Dan so hard across his face that he reels back in shock and stands immobilized. Rasheed turns to Linda.

RASHEED: Where are the children?

LINDA: At school. Please Rasheed . . . I can handle it . . .

Dan recovers but is still in shock.

DAN: You hit me . . . son-of-a-bitch . . . you hit me . . .

Rasheed moves towards him as he backs away.

DAN: I'm calling the cops . . . you shit.

Dan moves to the phone as Linda intervenes and takes the phone away.

LINDA: No!

DAN: Why the fuck not!

LINDA: No! I said no!

She moves back to Rasheed.

LINDA: Please leave Rasheed, you'll get into trouble. I can handle it. Please!

Rasheed calms down, and nods and walks away as Linda hurries after him.

LINDA: Has something happened Professor?

RASHEED: No . . . I just . . .

LINDA: It's got to do with news, right? Are you okay?

RASHEED: I'm well . . . I just wanted to . . .

LINDA: To what?

RASHEED: To . . . talk . . . never mind.

LINDA: I'm sorry I can't right now . . . you sure you're okay?

Rasheed nods and walks away. Linda looks at him and then hurries back.

DAN: Who the hell is he? Son-of-a-bitch!

Scene 7

INT—Rasheed's room—Day/Evening.

Rasheed sits in his room, watching the images of the terrorist strike on his television screen. He looks at the screen intently and then slowly covers his face with his hands.

Scene 8

INT—Lebanese café—Night.

Rasheed sits at a table at the far end of the restaurant, eating his dinner. The TV is on, as the other diners listen to the news. So does Rasheed. The manager walks up to Rasheed, sits at his table and smiles.

MANAGER: Salaam alaikum

RASHEED: Wa alaikum as-salaam!

The manager looks around and then whispers to Rasheed.

MANAGER: You have an American flag, friend?

Rasheed shakes his head. The manager pulls out a small one with a clip and hands it to Rasheed.

MANAGER: Here . . . wear it . . .there could be tough times ahead.

Rasheed looks at the manager's shirt, which has a flag clipped on to it. Rasheed smiles.

MANAGER: You think it's funny?

Rasheed shrugs his shoulders.

MANAGER: It's not, my friend. This is a very patriotic country! Anything happens—even something small— they start waving their flags. And what happened today is big, very big. Do you think it's the Arabs?

RASHEED: I don't know . . .
MANAGER: I curse the bastards who did it! May their souls rot in hell! Wear that flag . . . it's good for your health.

The manager gets up and walks back to his counter.

Scene 9

INT/EXT—Gas station—Night.

Rasheed sits pensively in his booth at the gas station. An elderly black couple is in the store buying a few things. Manuel sits at the door. Erasmus and Joe hang around outside, close to Rasheed's booth. The mood is silent. Erasmus walks up to the booth.

ERASMUS: You seen the news?

Rasheed nods.

JOE: Jesus, man!

The elderly couple approach Rasheed to pay and Rasheed totes up the Bill.

RASHEED: That will be 37 dollars and 60 cents, sir.

The old man pulls out his wallet to pay, counts his money, hesitates . . . his wife looks at him and then takes 3 items away . . . as Joe continues . . .

JOE: We're gonna get them, man . . .we're gonna get them.
OLD MAN: We didn't need them . . .
RASHEED: I understand, sir . . . 22 dollars 20 cents.

The man pays, Rasheed returns the change.

RASHEED: Thank you.

The couple smile and leave.

ERASMUS: Did you see them towers come down? What a sight it was . . . what a sight . . . like Judgement Day man . . . Judgement Day . . .
MANUEL: Like whole America come down . . . crazy . . . crazy!
JOE: Yeah! Now a lot of ass is going to get kicked. Red, white, pink or blue . . . the colour don't matter . . . ERASMUS: Who do you think did it, Brainman?

The old man and his wife get into their car.

OLD MAN: We had it coming! We've been stomping all over the world. Somebody just stomped back, that's life.

Rasheed turns to look at him. The elderly couple drive off.

Scene 10

EXT/INT—Mosque in Los Angeles—Early morning.

Rasheed drives to a mosque in Los Angeles. He is wearing the same clothes as the night before. Early morning worshippers are arriving. A few of them discuss the events in undertones. A series of dissolves show Rasheed going through the ceremonies of prayer. We see his pensive face.

FLASHBACK.

Rasheed stands at a dusty, windswept graveyard in Kabul. His head bowed, he stands before two graves. He prays.

Scene 11

EXT/INT—Jamal's house—Day: early morning.

Rasheed drives past the big gate and enters the driveway leading to Jamal's house. He is surprised to see the entire family along with Mr Hershovitz on the patio. Two other men stand a little distance away. There is palpable tension in the air. On seeing his car, Hershovitz hurries forward and meets up with Rasheed. Rasheed gets out of his car as the lawyer reaches him.

HERSHOVITZ: It's the FBI. Just do as I say.

Rasheed nods and they walk up to the two agents.

WALKER (*the FBI Agent*): Mr Durrani?

Rasheed nods.

WALKER: Good morning. I'm Agent Walker of the FBI and this is my colleague Agent Cusak.

Rasheed shakes their hands.

WALKER: We'd like to ask you some questions, but if you prefer to deal with us through your lawyer . . . that's fine.
RASHEED: I will answer your questions.
There is consternation in the family.
HERSHOVITZ: Let me handle this, Mr Durrani.
RASHEED: No, Mr Hershovitz, these gentlemen are from FBI and I know what that means.
WALKER: Shall we move inside?
They all move inside the house.

Scene 12

INT—Jamal's living room—Day.
The entire family of Jamal Khan sits at one end of the large and plush living room. Rasheed, Hershovitz and the two FBI agents are seated a slight distance away.
WALKER: Where were you coming from?
JAMAL: He normally goes for an early morning drive.
Walker turns to look at him then turns back to Rasheed.
WALKER: Is that true?
Rasheed thinks for a moment.
RASHEED: No, I was coming back from the gas station where I work.
CUSAK: Where you work illegally?
Rasheed nods as Walker smiles and continues.
WALKER: I'm glad you didn't lie because we've been keeping a tab on you.
He turns to look at Jamal Khan and then back at Rasheed.
WALKER: Do you know why we are here, Mr Durrani?
RASHEED: Yes.
WALKER: Tell us why.
HERSHOVITZ: I'll take it from here . . .
RASHEED: No, please. I've had too many spokesmen in my life.
He turns back to the two Agents.

RASHEED: It's because of the events in New York and Washington.
WALKER: Did you see it on television?
RASHEED: Yes.
WALKER: What did you think of them?
RASHEED: They were amongst the most ghastly events I have seen in my life . . .
CUSAK: What do you mean *amongst?*
RASHEED: I cannot put a value on the monstrous and the brutal sir, but I have seen some terrible things . . . for instance the murder of my wife and son, the slaughter of my friends, thousands of people killed and maimed by landmines and bombs, hundreds of thousands of people living like maggots in refugee camps . . . I can go on, but do you want me to?
WALKER: All this must have made you a very angry man, Mr Durrani.
RASHEED: Yes . . . I was angry . . . very angry.
WALKER: With America?
RASHEED: Yes.
WALKER: Why?

Hershovitz leans forward, but Rasheed stops him with a gesture.

RASHEED: Do you really want to know?
WALKER: I'm listening.
RASHEED: All right. It has been such a long time since I have spoken. And, for a teacher, it is a very harsh sentence. So please forgive me if I get slightly carried away. I shall take a short history class. Listen carefully Nusrat, it is also meant for you.

Rasheed leans back on the sofa.

RASHEED: The same people that America today calls terrorists in Afghanistan . . . it used to call freedom fighters, feudal warlords, mercenaries, drug barons. Ah . . . and antiquated priests. It armed them and trained them. And why were they armed and trained? Because they were fighting for God and country. Against an evil empire. Holy warriors.

Rasheed pauses, looks at the people in the room, then continues.

RASHEED: When you can't convince people to go to war, to kill,

to hate . . . bring God into the argument. It always works. So gentleman, these holy warriors, America's freedom fighters, won the war . . . a ghastly, blood-drenched, savage tango. They slaughtered anyone who opposed them . . . schoolteachers, doctors, farmers, engineers, students. And then these freedom fighters came to visit my wife. Why? Because they called her a communist. Communist! A word that always gets the attention of Washington! They called my wife a communist because she believed that men and women were equal. For America's freedom fighters, women were inferior . . . scum. Do you know how she died?

Rasheed looks at his audience.

Flashback #4. INT/EXT—Rasheed's home—

Day. The scene of murder of Rasheed's wife and son with Rasheed's voice over. 'I was at my university when three soldiers met my wife and my son on the street outside my home. They ordered her to cover her head . . . she refused to . . . they tried to force her . . . she resisted . . . my son tried to help her. He pushed a soldier away and tried to take my wife inside the house. Just as he did so, they opened fire . . . they kept firing till my wife and son were dead.'

The flashback ends and Rasheed leans back against the sofa.

RASHEED: Do I blame those soldiers? No. No, I don't. They were just young boys who were told that they were fighting against Satan. Ordinary people, tutored to slaughter. And who were their teachers? Can you guess? So, gentleman, these are the people that America told the world, are freedom fighters and today they call them terrorists.

There is a silence for a while.

RASHEED: Wouldn't you be angry, Mr Walker?

Walker stares at Rasheed.

RASHEED: I was. But after seeing what happened to New York, I no longer am. I feel a terrible sadness inside. But in all this, I feel there is also a lesson to be learnt for America.

CUSAK; And what is the lesson, Mr Durrani?

RASHEED: Your tone is very sarcastic, Mr Cusak. You feel, what

can a miserable refugee like me teach you? Perhaps you are right. But I will tell you what I feel anyway.

Rasheed takes a breath.

RASHEED: There are two images that represent America. One is the Lady with the flame and the other Wall Street. One is real, the other is an illusion. America will have to decide which to follow.

He leans back and surveys the room.

RASHEED: My history class is over and I have nothing more to say. I am not a terrorist. Am I under arrest?

Walker hesitates.

WALKER: No . . .

RASHEED: Then, I would like to leave this land. I want to tend the graves of my wife and son . . . I have been a refugee too long.

Walker and Cusak look at each other . . . a message is conveyed.

CUSAK: We'll let you know when you can.

RASHEED: Thank you.

Rasheed gets up and leaves. Walker and Cusak look at him. Rasheed walks away and stops for a moment, next to his sister and her family. Then he leaves the room.

Scene 13

INT—Rasheed's room—Night.

Rasheed stands before the mirror. He is in the last stages of a shave. He hears the cat mew and turns to see it at the door.

RASHEED: Ah! My good neighbour . . . how are you?

He goes to the kitchen and pours some milk into a saucer and places it in front of the cat.

RASHEED: Drink up, prince of the night . . . and beware of Bozo!

He watches the cat slurp up the milk. He gets up and quietly shuts the door. The cat continues to drink the milk.

Scene 14

INT—Gas station—Night.

Rasheed drives up to the gas station. Manuel is in the store. Rasheed sees Erasmus and Joe across the road. He waves to them. They wave back. He sees Linda standing near her car and walks up to her. Linda still has the bruise on her face.

LINDA: Hi!

RASHEED: Good evening, Linda . . . I thought I wouldn't see you tonight . . .

LINDA: You looked a mess yesterday . . . so I . . .

RASHEED: Where is Dan?

LINDA: He's gone . . . how are you?

RASHEED: I think I'm well . . .

LINDA: You sure? You said you wanted to talk . . .

Rasheed looks at her for a while, then smiles.

RASHEED: Ah . . . yes . . . yes . . . there are some things I must tell you.

He pauses as Linda looks at him with curiosity.

RASHEED: Did I ever tell you that you are a wonderful mother and a very courageous woman?

Linda is surprised.

LINDA: No . . .

RASHEED: Well, I'm telling you now. LINDA: Thank you.

RASHEED: Wait . . . there is more . . . I also want to tell you that, for me, you are the First Lady of America!

Linda is shocked.

LINDA: You know what that means, Professor?

RASHEED: Of course. LINDA: Thank you . . .

She puts her hand to her heart and bows. Rasheed does the same. Linda looks at him thoughtfully and says softly.

LINDA: You're going away . . . aren't you?

Rasheed nods, Linda looks at him for a moment.

LINDA: Why?

RASHEED: Because if I stay any longer, there is the distinct possibility that I will fall in love with you . . . which will be disastrous!

LINDA: Why?

RASHEED: It will destroy the greatest friendship in the world.

Linda looks at him and smiles. She walks up to him and kisses him on the cheek and then rests her head against him. Rasheed puts his arms around her. Erasmus and Joe from across the road, whoop and clap. Manuel smiles. Linda and Rasheed wave to them and continue standing the way they were. Erasmus and Joe whistle and clap some more. The cameras slowly pulls out to reveal the street, the gas station and, the night.